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**DENYING AL QAEDA SAFE HAVEN IN A WEAK STATE:
AN ANALYSIS OF U.S. STRATEGY IN YEMEN**

by

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December 2010

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U.S. STRATEGY IN YEMEN**

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ABSTRACT

The dubious merger between the al Qaeda affiliates in Yemen and Saudi Arabia in January 2009 quickly raised a “red flag” among U.S. policy makers in Washington. The newly formed transnational terror group known as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) spurred President Barack Obama to initiate a thorough review and reinvention of U.S. policy towards Yemen. In response to the President’s initiative, the National Security Council (NSC) developed a “two pronged strategy,” which sought to strengthen Yemen’s security apparatus and improve its governance. The strategy is consistent with the administration’s overall perception of the vulnerabilities inherent in a weak state, yet an investigation into the elements that define Yemen’s sociopolitical landscape, as well as an analysis of AQAP’s strategy, reveal that the U.S. strategy toward Yemen embraces inaccurate assumptions. This study finds that the rapid buildup of Yemen’s security apparatus prior to the implementation of government reforms has perpetuated the authoritarian rule within the country, further entrenching AQAP within the marginalized southern population.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAIA	Abyan-Aden Islamic Army
AQAP	Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	Al Qaeda in Iraq
AQIY	Al Qaeda in Yemen
EAP	Eastern Aden Protectorate
FLOSY	Front for the Liberation of South Yemen
GPC	General People's Congress
IJO	Islamic Jihad Organization
JMP	Joint Meeting Parties
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NLF	National Liberation Force
NSC	National Security Council
NSM	National Military Strategy
NSS	National Security Strategy
OEV	Operation Earnest Voice
PDRY	Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen
QDR	Quadrennial Defense Review
ROY	Republic of Yemen
UAR	United Arab Republic
USAID	United States Agency of International Development
USCENTCOM	United States Central Command
USSOF	United States Special Operations Forces
WAP	Western Aden Protectorate
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic
YSP	Yemen Socialist Party

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Figure 1. Map of Yemen

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I. INTRODUCTION

Al Qaeda has used weak states as safe havens since its inception in 1988, and since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. has codified the significance of weak states in its most authoritative national strategies. These strategies have proclaimed the intention to counter al Qaeda and its associated movements as they attempt to set up safe havens in the ‘ungoverned spaces’ inherent in weak states. But since 2008, there has been a string of attacks by the al Qaeda affiliate in Yemen, including a coordinated attack against the U.S. embassy in Sana’a; links to the Ft. Hood shootings in Texas; the attempted bombing of flight 253 over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009; and most recently the attempted downing of cargo planes bound for the U.S. So far, there has been a muted response to these attacks which have targeted the U.S. homeland. The U.S. strategy toward weak states has maintained a resolute tone since 9/11; but since 2001, al Qaeda has become entrenched in Yemen. How has the U.S. applied its weak state strategy toward Yemen? Does the U.S. have an effective strategy to counter al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula?

The dubious merger between the al Qaeda affiliates in Yemen and Saudi Arabia in January 2009 quickly raised a ‘red flag’ among U.S. policy makers in Washington. The newly formed transnational terror group known as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) spurred President Barack Obama to initiate a thorough review and reinvention of U.S. policy towards Yemen.¹ In response to the President’s initiative the National Security Council (NSC) developed a “two pronged strategy” which sought to strengthen Yemen’s security apparatus, and improve its governance. The strategy is consistent with the administration’s overall perception of the vulnerabilities inherent in a “weak state,” but the strategy itself does not provide a realistic or effective approach towards Yemen. This study presents two propositions which replace the broad and idealistic assumptions present in the current strategy with a more applicable set of core assumptions based on both the sociopolitical landscape of Yemen and the known

¹ House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Yemen on the Brink: Implications for U.S. Policy: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 111th Cong. 2nd sess., 2010, 9.

strategies of AQAP. In essence, this paper finds that the U.S. initiated buildup of Yemen's security apparatus has far outpaced the implementation of governmental reforms, thus further entrenching AQAP within the marginalized southern population. Consequently, any strategy which aims to counter AQAP must place the tribal networks of southern Yemen as its Center of Gravity. A focused effort on improving governance from the grassroots up in southern Yemen, along with a U.S. led counterterrorism effort which directly confronts the immediate threats from AQAP, would give the "two pronged strategy" the traction it needs to be effective.

The strategy developed to counter AQAP in Yemen is the first application of a broader approach by the U.S. to deny safe havens to al Qaeda. The principle tenant of this approach is to strengthen weak states in order to decrease the amount of 'ungoverned spaces.' This policy is alluded to in a majority of the published strategies which come from the Office of the President and the Department of Defense.² The most recent and authoritative policy on weak states resides in the 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) which expands on denying al Qaeda safe havens in "at-risk" states. The characteristics of this approach include, "information-sharing, law enforcement cooperation, and establishing new practices to counter evolving adversaries." It also states that the strategy is meant "to help states avoid becoming terrorist safe havens by helping them build their capacity for responsible governance and security through development and security sector assistance."³

These broad and ambitious objectives are based on bold assumptions. First, they assume that 'at risk' states actually *want* help in building responsible governance. Second, they assume that the governments of potential 'safe havens' would readily share information, or cooperate in law enforcement; thus presuming that the U.S. and the 'at risk' states share the same security priorities. And finally, it assumes that the State is the proper center of gravity in the effort to counter al Qaeda. These assumptions can also be

² The survey includes the 2010 National Security Strategy, 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review Report, 2008 National Defense Strategy, and 2004 National Military Strategy. (2004 remains the latest edition of the NMS.)

³ The White House, *National Security Strategy* (May, 2010), 21.
http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf (accessed October 20, 2010).

thought of as “conditions” for the strategy to be effective, and these conditions are not present in Yemen. The NSC developed the new policy for Yemen based on the tenets of the “weak state strategy” residing within NSS, and they expect the assumptions to hold true. Yet the assumptions within the weak state strategy do not accurately reflect the conditions in Yemen.

A. TENETS OF THE WEAK STATE STRATEGY

The strategy crafted by the NSC in the spring of 2009 contains the trademarked assumptions associated with weak states. The 2008 National Defense Strategy (NDS) for example describes weak states as “fertile ground” for terrorists who thrive in “ungoverned spaces.”⁴ And former CENTCOM Commander General Anthony Zinni was quoted as describing the ungoverned spaces of weak states as “Petri dishes for extremism.”⁵ The strategy articulated by the NDS therefore asserts that in order to reduce extremism, the U.S. should strive to shrink the ungoverned spaces that are inherent in weak states.⁶ The way to shrink the ungoverned spaces as described by policy makers is to strengthen the State so that it can govern the ungoverned areas. The consensus is for a “whole of government” approach which involves a multitude of government agencies, most notably the Departments of State and Defense; with the State Department focusing on governance and the Defense Department directing the security improvements. This whole of government philosophy is present in the 2010 NSS which emphasizes building the capacities for governance and security in ‘at risk’ states.⁷ These strategic documents elucidate on the dangers of ungoverned spaces within weak states, and emphasize the importance of State building to remedy the problem. While the tenets of the weak state strategy sound plausible on paper, the application of the strategy may prove to be problematic.

⁴ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *National Defense Strategy* (June, 2008), 3-8.
<http://www.defense.gov/news/2008%20national%20defense%20strategy.pdf> (accessed October 20, 2010).

⁵ House Committee, *Yemen on the Brink*, 35.

⁶ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, 8.

⁷ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 21.

Table 1. U.S. Strategy to Deny al Qaeda Sanctuary in Weak States

STRATEGIC DOCUMENT	TENETS OF STRATEGY	ASSUMPTIONS
NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Address potential safe-havens before al Qaeda and its terrorist affiliates can take root. 2. Cooperate with governments of 'at risk' states through information sharing and law enforcement cooperation. 3. Build the capacity for responsible governance and security through developmental and security sector assistance. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The U.S. has the resources to address all potential safe-havens. 2. 'At risk' states share the same security priorities as the U.S. 3. A responsible security apparatus can be obtained by building up the security sector. 4. Governments of weak states are willing to reform. 5. Building government capacity and security capacity are concurrent efforts.
NATIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Help build the internal capacities of countries at risk. 2. Work with like-minded states to shrink the ungoverned areas of the world and thereby deny extremists and other hostile parties sanctuary. 3. Help others police themselves in order to collectively address threats to the broader international system. 	
QUADRENIAL DEFENCE REVIEW	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Work with the military forces of partner nations to strengthen their capacity for internal security 2. Coordinate those activities with those of other U.S. government agencies as they work to strengthen civilian capabilities, thus denying terrorist and insurgent safe havens. 	
NATIONAL MILITARY STRATEGY	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Work with other nations' militaries and other governmental agencies, the Armed Forces help to establish favorable security conditions and increase the capabilities of partners. 	

B. A CASE STUDY IN WEAK STATE STRATEGY

The formation of AQAP in Yemen has given the U.S. its first opportunity to apply the weak state strategy outside the realm of combat operations. Wartime reconstruction efforts certainly fit into the weak state approach, but they benefit from a colossal amount of resources and direct U.S. control. Afghanistan in particular has been a war defined on denying safe haven to al Qaeda's core; and the insurgency in Iraq has also created conditions for a potential terrorist safe haven as the government transitions to democracy. In both theaters of operation the U.S. has been able to proceed with strengthening the State through direct intervention, and the use of immense resources. As of FY2011, the cumulative funding for efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan has been \$1.3 trillion, with each operation employing over 100,000 troops at their peak.⁸ Yemen provides the first instance where a tangible threat from al Qaeda resides in a sovereign, 'partner' nation where the U.S. has neither the political control, nor the military resources to transform the State and pursue al Qaeda. This study analyzes the current U.S. strategy towards Yemen as a case study in the implementation of the weak state approach as outlined in the NSS. Furthermore it questions the validity of the strategy towards Yemen through an investigation of its underlying assumptions.

C. THE "TWO PRONGED STRATEGY" IN YEMEN

The "two pronged strategy" for Yemen focuses on building the capacity for good governance, as well as a strengthened security apparatus, in order to counter AQAP. Specifically, the strategy consists of two elements: First, to "strengthen the Government of Yemen's ability to promote security and minimize the threat from violent extremists within its borders. And second, to "mitigate Yemen's economic crisis and deficiencies in government capacity, provision of services, transparency, and adherence to the rule of law." The strategy also notes that "as Yemen's security challenges and its

⁸ U.S. Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, by Amy Belasco, congressional Rep. RL33110, Wahsington: The Service, September 2, 2010, 1.

social, political, and economic challenges are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, so U.S. policy must be holistic and flexible in order to be effective both in the short and long term.”⁹

1. The First Prong: USCENTCOM and Building the Security Apparatus

First and foremost, the NSC’s strategy toward Yemen consists of strengthening the security apparatus within that country. Terrorist attacks on U.S. soil including the Ft. Hood shootings, the Christmas Day bombing attempt, and the more recent attempts to detonate packages onboard cargo planes over the East coast, have made Yemen’s internal security a matter of U.S. national security. To strengthen U.S. security vis-à-vis Yemen’s security apparatus, USCENTCOM has taken the lead on building up Yemen’s border security and counterterrorism forces. In the USCENTCOM posture statement given by General David Petraeus in March 2010, there are echoes of the NSS and NDS weak state strategy, along with the more targeted strategy toward Yemen as formulated by the NSC. In describing CENTCOM’s major activities, besides Afghanistan and Iraq, the posture statement lists the responsibilities of defeating “al-Qaeda and its Associated Movements,” as well as “denying sanctuaries and disrupting support for insurgent groups,” and with an overarching aim to “bolster at-risk states.”¹⁰ But a more telling glimpse into the Yemen strategy, General Petraeus states that CENTCOM is tasked with helping “build Yemen’s security, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorist capabilities,” by nearly doubling the amount of U.S. security assistance in the coming year.¹¹ And indeed the amount of security assistance funds jumped from \$67 million in 2009, to

⁹ Strategy as laid out by Jeffrey Feltman, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, and Robert Godec, the Principal Deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism. House Committee, *Yemen on the Brink*, 8–15.

¹⁰ Senate Armed Services Committee, *Statement of General David H. Petraeus before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of U.S. Central Command* (March 16, 2010), 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

\$150 million in 2010.¹² Security assistance does not stop with material support however; training Yemeni counterterrorist forces has also become a priority.

Building Yemen's security apparatus to meet the immediate threats posed by AQAP have centered on training and equipping security forces. This is accomplished by U.S. Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT), which has up to 75 members training Yemeni counterterrorism forces, and additional personnel to run development initiatives in concert with USAID.¹³ The funding, equipment, and training provided by the U.S. has given the government of Yemen and President Saleh an immediate boost in security capacity, while the effort to bring good governance is a more long term affair.

2. The Second Prong: Building Governmental Capacity With USAID

The second pillar of the NSC's strategy toward Yemen has been undertaken by USAID, which provides a more detailed sub-strategy than in the security sector, and gives a more promising lean towards a grassroots approach to reform. The organization's overarching goal "is to increase Yemen's stability through targeted interventions in vulnerable areas," with the underlying hypothesis that, "addressing the development needs of underserved communities is causally related to improving political and social stability."¹⁴ As laid out in their 2010–2012 Yemen Strategy, USAID takes a two tiered approach by (1) improving livelihoods in targeted communities, and (2) improving governance capacities to mitigate drivers of instability.¹⁵ The targeted approach seeks to prioritize efforts in Amran, Al Jawf, Marib, Shabwah, Abyan, Al Dahle'e, Lahj, and Aden; all of which are existing or potential safe havens for AQAP. While this strategy astutely identifies and targets the areas where AQAP has a foothold, it has already

¹² A speech delivered by the Department of State's Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Daniel Benjamin, *U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy in Yemen* (8 September 2010) <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/2010/147296.htm> (accessed November 2, 2010).

¹³ SOCCENT mission outlined in U.S. Agency for International Development, *USAID Yemen: 2010-2012 Yemen Country Strategy*, 12 http://www.usaid.gov/locations/middle_east/documents/yemen/USAIDYemen2010-2012Strategy.pdf (accessed August 22, 2010); the number of counterterrorism advisors referenced from Eric Schmitt and Scott Shane, "Aid to Fight Qaeda in Yemen Divides U.S. Officials," *The New York Times* (September 15, 2010).

¹⁴ U.S. Agency for International Development, *2010-2012 Yemen Country Strategy*, 2.

¹⁵ Ibid.

faltered. As described within USAID's strategy document, "resources are insufficient to sustain operations in all eight governorates."¹⁶ This fact highlights the vulnerabilities of the weak state strategy where the aims are overly ambitious, and lack the resources of major State building efforts such as in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The grassroots strategy of USAID has taken a ground-up approach to reforming governance in Yemen, but they include the central government of Yemen as an integral part to the strategy's success. Their efforts at the local level are meant to "raise the awareness of the national government to local needs," with the end-state of making the government "more responsive to the people's needs."¹⁷ This type of strategy is obviously long term, in contrast to the fast paced security build up; and its success also presumes the government's willingness to be more responsive to the population in the southern governorates.

The two pronged strategy toward Yemen focuses on building up the government's security apparatus in the short term, while taking a long term approach towards good governance. The Yemen strategy takes on the same assumptions inherent in the NSS's policy toward weak states. The broad presumption of the strategy is that the government of Yemen shares the same priorities and goals as the United States, thus using its increased military capacity to fight AQAP, and becoming more responsive to the southern population through better governance. More importantly, it assumes that state building is the key to denying al Qaeda a safe haven in Yemen. This study asserts that the sociopolitical landscape in Yemen as well as the populist strategy of AQAP provides evidence to the contrary.

¹⁶ U.S. Agency for International Development, *2010-2012 Yemen Country Strategy*, 2.

¹⁷ U.S. Agency for International Development, *2010-2012 Yemen Country Strategy*, 11.

Table 2. Weak State Strategy as Applied to Yemen

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY	TENETS	ASSUMPTIONS
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL: “TWO PRONGED STRATEGY” TOWARD YEMEN	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strengthen the Government of Yemen’s ability to promote security and minimize the threat from violent extremists within its borders. 2. Mitigate Yemen’s economic crisis and deficiencies in government capacity, provision of services, transparency, and adherence to the rule of law. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Building Yemen’s security capacity is key to minimizing the threat from AQAP. 2. Security assistance will be used to directly confront AQAP.
U.S. AGENCY OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: ‘YEMEN COUNTRY STRATEGY	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Livelihoods in vulnerable communities improved: Addressing people’s basic needs and opportunities at the local level by improving their access to basic services, by expanding economic opportunities and by promoting political/civic empowerment. 2. Governance capacities to mitigate drivers of instability improved: Specifically emphasize good governance, working at the national, local and community levels. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. The Government of Yemen will share the same priorities and will cooperate in reforming governance.
THE POSTURE OF U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Help build Yemen’s security, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorist capabilities. 	

D. NEW PROPOSITIONS

The propositions presented below are based on the analysis of Yemen's contemporary history, the structure and function of Yemen's central government, the Islamist trends within the population, and the tribal-centric strategy being executed by AQAP. The concluding policy recommendations are based on an analysis of the "two pronged" strategy toward Yemen; an analysis which asserts that the aims of the strategy are too diffused, and are not realistically tailored for Yemen's sociopolitical landscape. In contrast, the resulting policy recommendations propose a more targeted political approach, and a more aggressive counterterrorism effort led by the U.S.

Proposition #1: *Building Yemen's security capacity prior to achieving political reform only gives President Saleh the ability to widen the rifts in the South, thus giving AQAP the ability to capitalize on their grievance-based approach.* While in the long term the government of Yemen will need the capacity to secure its borders, strengthening President Saleh's security forces prior to political reform and reconciliation is a dangerous proposition. President Saleh is running an authoritarian government, and if given the military means, he will continue to solve his internal problems with force.

Proposition #2: *The tribal areas and the population of southern Yemen are the center of gravity in the struggle against AQAP.* Therefore, U.S. strategy should focus on reconciling the grievances of the southern population through a grassroots approach to building capacity, and focusing on tribal support and participation in local government. Reconciliation and tribal partnerships in the South are the foundation of good governance in Yemen.

E. STRUCTURING THE ARGUMENT

The above propositions are illustrated through a sociopolitical analysis of Yemen. The analysis addresses the assumptions residing in the U.S. policy toward weak states; and the two pronged strategy toward Yemen in particular. The strategy assumes that first, the government of Yemen shares the same security concerns as the U.S., and wants to cooperate fully in the fight against AQAP; second, that President Saleh values democratic governance and is *willing* to build a more transparent and responsive State; and finally,

the strategy assumes that strengthening the State's capacities is the key to countering AQAP. The following chapters will argue that these assumptions do not accurately reflect the sociopolitical conditions within Yemen.

1. Historical Analysis

Chapter II will provide an historical background of Yemen which is often overlooked, but provides insights into the current political and social structure, as well as the origins of the divisions within the country. The contrasting histories of North and South Yemen in particular illuminate the fissures which AQAP is currently exploiting. The modern history of Yemen, especially during the mid-20th century, is the formative period of the nation; culminating with the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, and the subsequent civil war in 1994. The history of Yemen reveals the origins of the Southern Movement, as well as the importance of the tribal confederations and their link with the government. The formative events in Yemen's history build the foundation for propositions presented above.

2. Political Analysis

Chapter III looks at the government institutions and political parties which make up Yemen's pseudo pluralistic system. The chapter demonstrates how President Saleh leans towards authoritarianism, purposefully slowing political reform. After the 1994 civil war President Saleh isolated and marginalized the southern portion of the country and continued the government under a veneer of democracy. The true government of Yemen consists of a vast patronage system run by President Saleh. The patronage system is a true shadow government which gives President Saleh the ability to control events throughout a large part of the country through the cooptation of tribal sheiks, and opposition leaders. His efforts at government reform are often shallow and meant to solicit foreign aid. Although the institutions, and in some cases the opposition, characteristic of a pluralistic democracy are present, they are often time stymied by the patronage system. As resources are beginning to run out in Yemen, the circle of patronage is getting smaller and smaller; in the mean time President Saleh has placed his family and members of his tribe in key military and government positions. The nature of

President Saleh's rule does not lend itself towards transparency and responsiveness; and a rapid boost in his security apparatus will only lead to a more authoritarian State.

3. Socioreligious Analysis

Chapter IV shifts from a government centric view of Yemen towards its social makeup. The tribally governed areas of both northern and southern Yemen have been called "incubators for extremism" by the U.S., yet the religious and social aspects of the population indicate otherwise.¹⁸ Chapter IV will argue that the tribal populations in "ungoverned" areas of Yemen do not provide a breeding ground for extremists, and partnerships with tribal communities provides a more powerful tool against AQAP rather than building up the State's security apparatus.

4. Strategic Analysis of AQAP

Chapter V analyzes the background and strategy of AQAP. The group's populist strategy is a result of al Qaeda's lessons learned from Iraq, as well as the indigenous nature of the AQAP leadership. The seemingly indiscriminant targeting used by the Yemeni counterterrorism forces; and the collateral damage from U.S. missile strikes has given AQAP all the fuel they need to win over the population. Their strategic communication, and lack thereof from the U.S., has added to their success. The analysis of AQAP strategy shows that a quick build up of Yemen's military capacity, prior to reforming the government, can have disastrous effects. Additionally, the study of AQAP's strategy illustrates the importance of placing the southern tribal networks as the center of gravity. The state-centric approach by the U.S. has only further entrenched AQAP within the southern population.

¹⁸ Daniel Benjamin, *U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy in Yemen*.

5. Policy Recommendations

Finally, Chapter VI will provide policy recommendations based on the two Propositions introduced in this study. Proposition One asserts that building Yemen's security capacity prior to achieving political reform only gives President Saleh the ability to widen the rifts in the South, thus giving AQAP the ability to capitalize on their grievance-based approach. The U.S. should therefore provide Yemen with the ability to patrol its coastline and borders, but not increase its capacity to coerce its population. Partnership in counterterrorism should continue, but the U.S. should lead the efforts. This includes the addition of counterterrorism operations executed by U.S. Special Forces, to selectively target AQAP leadership. Missile attacks from drones and large scale offensives by the Yemeni military have only increased AQAP leverage. This leads in to Proposition Two which insists that *the tribal areas and the population of southern Yemen are the center of gravity in the struggle against AQAP*. The current strategy by USAID has essentially acknowledged this fact, but it is woefully under-resourced and still assumes cooperation from the central government in helping to build governance in the South. Instead of spreading out resources, the U.S. should focus on a large scale campaign to mediate southern grievances; including scheduling talks between tribal sheiks, Southern Movement leaders, and the Yemeni government.

This paper argues that the sociopolitical conditions in Yemen contradict the underlying assumptions within the current U.S. strategy, and that a more tailored and aggressive approach is necessary to counter AQAP. The following chapters provide an analysis of Yemen's history, governance, and society; as well as the background and strategy of AQAP. The concluding policy recommendations are based on a more accurate assessment of Yemen's sociopolitical landscape.

Table 3. Policy Recommendations Based on New Propositions.

PROPOSITIONS	POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Building Yemen's security capacity prior to achieving political reform provides President Saleh the means to widen the rifts in the South, thus giving AQAP the ability to capitalize on their grievance-based approach. 2. The tribal areas and the population of southern Yemen are the center of gravity in the struggle against AQAP. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The U.S. should take the lead in counterterrorism operations to address the immediate threat posed by AQAP. 2. Reconciling the southern grievances is paramount. 3. Focus on electoral and economic reform prior to building capacity in the security sector.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

“A page of history is worth a pound of logic”
—Oliver Wendell Holmes

The words of Oliver Wendell Holmes could not be more relevant than with the U.S. perceptions of Yemen. Search any of the numerous policy papers, Congressional transcripts, or think-tank reports which deal with Yemen and there is scant reference to that country's history prior to the bombing of the USS *Cole* on October 12, 2000. National security policies and strategies which are based on a mere decade of historical knowledge are flawed on many levels. The divisions and grievances which characterize the contemporary conflicts of Yemen are born from three formative periods in Yemen's modern history: first, the imperial rivalries of the 19th century; next, the revolutionary turmoil during the 1960s; and finally, the tumultuous unification period during the early 1990s. All three of these formative episodes in Yemen's history have exacerbated the rift between the northern and southern populations of the country. The analysis of Yemen's history points to some key conclusions which should form the core assumptions of U.S. strategy toward Yemen: first, Yemen has never been a naturally unified State, therefore there is a traditional tendency toward division; second, the Zaydi and tribal confederations of the North have always had a dominating influence within government and are not inclined to give up control or share power; and finally, the 1990 unification and subsequent civil war have magnified the traditional rifts between North and South, thus reconciling the grievances from the civil war is a necessity in any government reform effort. While the following analysis of Yemen's history is not all inclusive, it expands on the formative periods in order to identify the key sociopolitical characteristics of the country.

While a state structure did not formally exist in Yemen until 1962, the autonomy of the tribal networks, and the central government's animus towards foreign influence, has been an enduring characteristic of Yemeni society. In addition to the antipathy shown towards hegemonic powers such as the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, Yemen society itself has long been divided by geographic

barriers, and political ideology.¹⁹ Although united politically in 1990, Yemen has never been a united society. Fault lines which are present today were forged over the past centuries by Imperial powers, religious leaders, political ideologies, and Islamic fundamentalism.

Three formative periods of Yemeni history are of particular importance. First, the period from 1871 to 1918 holds many milestones which can be viewed as the causal factors for the schism between North and South Yemen. Second, the turbulent period between 1962 and 1970; when revolution and civil war fundamentally changed the political landscape of the region. And finally, the period of unification, democracy, and civil war from 1990 to 1994 which ushered in an era of militant Islamists and a widening rift between the North and South. These three periods have shaped the current sociopolitical conditions in Yemen; they also provide valuable lessons on the tribal-state relationship and its impact on events. As the U.S. strategy toward Yemen holds political and social reform as one of its primary tenets, it is important to note the deep-rooted and enduring sociopolitical characteristics of the country.

A. ARABIA FELIX: A GENERAL HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The strategic importance of Yemen was well known prior to the three formative periods mentioned above. Yemen was not only an ancient crossroads for trade, but it was also a producer of desired commodities. Additionally, the climate between the mountains and the Red Sea on the Western coast of modern day Yemen produced a fertile environment for crops and livestock to flourish.²⁰ “The fabled home of the Queen of Sheba and the Maji, famed for its frankincense and later its coffee, this zone was known to the Romans and later to European cartographers as *Arabia Felix*.”²¹

Despite the well traveled trade route and profitable coffee production, European empires remained content on the shores of the Mediterranean; the Ottomans being the

¹⁹ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 41.

²⁰ Sheila Carapico, “Arabia Incognita: An Invitation to Arabian Peninsula Studies,” in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, eds. Madawi Al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis (Gorndonville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 25.

²¹ Ibid.

exception to this rule. The Ottoman Empire expanded its influence over Yemen in the mid 16th century. But less than a century later they decided to leave southern Arabia in order to focus on their European borders. The Ottomans were never able to subjugate the Zaydi tribes in the northern highlands of Yemen, and they eventually determined that the price of continual tribal conflict was too high.²² Without external pressures the Zaydi Imamate was able to expand its influence from the northern highlands in to the southern and eastern lowlands of Yemen. However, the arrival of the British Empire in 1839 began a new age of Imperial competition, and proved to be a barrier to Zaydi expansion.

B. IMPERIAL INFLUENCE IN YEMEN FROM 1871–1918

What could be described as a lesser version of “The Great Game” being played out in Afghanistan, the imperial competition between the Ottoman and British Empires in southern Arabia was no less formative to the region.²³ While the British arrival in Aden in 1839 may have slowed the aspirations of the Zaydi imamate in the North, the subsequent construction of the Suez Canal in 1869 quickly and fundamentally changed the political dynamics within Yemen. The independence of the Imamate in the highlands came to an end in 1871 as the Ottomans returned to govern northern Yemen in an effort to counter British influence in Aden.²⁴ In a response to the Ottoman incursion into northern Yemen, the British expanded their control of southern Yemen territory by “bringing the hinterlands into a treaty of protection,” thus forming a buffer against Ottoman and Zaydi expansion.²⁵ The modern era of Ottoman control only lasted until 1918, but it left behind a framework for modernization, and also shaped the policies of the British in southern Yemen, who would ultimately stay in control until 1967. The North-South border delineated by a Turk-Anglo agreement would be the enduring legacy

²² Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 15.

²³ The Great Game refers to the Imperial competition between the British and Russian Empires in Afghanistan during the late 19th century. In that case European drawn borders such as the Durand line separating Pakistan and Afghanistan are still having an effect on contemporary event.

²⁴ Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 37.

²⁵ John M. Willis, “Leaving Only Question-marks: Geographies of Rule in Modern Yemen,” in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, eds. Madawi Al-Rasheed and Rober Vitalis (Gorndonville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 123.

of the imperial rivalry, and it would go on to shape both physical and political divisions for decades to come. In addition to their dealings with the British, the Ottomans' interaction with the Zaydi imamate during the period between 1871 and 1918 provides valuable insight into current sociopolitical conditions in northern Yemen.

The Ottomans' second attempt at controlling the highlands of Yemen was marked by social and political improvements, but was ultimately marred by failure due to the strong partnership fostered between the Imamate and the northern tribes. The intent of Constantinople was to bring Yemen into the Ottoman fold; much like its provinces in the Levant. But early reform efforts for the "backward" tribal society in northern Yemen focused on pacification of the cycle of revolts led by the Hamid al-Dins Imamate.²⁶ After an especially violent revolt led by Imam Yayha in 1904, the Ottomans put together a Commission to find ways to reform Yemen with methods other than military suppression.²⁷ Certain aspects of the Ottoman plan are strikingly similar to the current U.S. strategy toward Yemen.

The Memduh Commission of 1904 was a review of failed policies in Yemen, and it recommended solutions to effectively govern the region.²⁸ The report focused on solutions other than force in order to win over the population from the rebels; and recognized poverty and a stagnant economy as focus areas.²⁹ For the Ottoman's there was a deliberate emphasis on state-building including education reform, infrastructure and governance. The Imamate's use of Shari'a law was replaced by the Ottoman system of justice; a robust educational system was implemented; and provincial governments were set up to decentralize control.³⁰ Many of the reforms were never implemented however due to the divisive influence of Imam Yahya. In 1908 the Imam signed a treaty with the Ottoman governor which reinstated Shari'a as the basis for the legal system in

²⁶ Jon Mandaville, "Memduh Pasha and Aziz Bey: Ottoman Experience in Yemen," in *Contemporary Yemen: Politics and Historical Background*, ed. B.R. Pridham (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 21.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ The Memduh Commission has strikingly similar findings as contemporary U.S. commissions on the same subject.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 26.

areas under Imamate control. Additionally, in 1911, after another revolt led by Yahya, the Ottoman's officially recognized the Imam's control over the northern highlands; all but granting the Zaydi Imamate independence.³¹ Official independence came in 1918, as the Ottoman Empire collapsed after its defeat in WWI. Once free from imperial restraints the imam then turned his attention south, to the British controlled protectorates.

In contrast to the Ottoman policies in Yemen, the aim of the British was to control the port of Aden, not to bring the entire region under the control of the Crown. But due to the Ottoman influence in the North, the British assumed an indirect form of control over the Yemeni population on the periphery of Aden. The addition of the West and East Aden Protectorates to the British sphere of influence was supposed to protect the port of Aden from Ottoman and Imamate intrusion; but the undoing of British control would ultimately come from the restive tribal regions of these peripheral territories.

From the late 19th century until the middle of the twentieth century, the British used the tribal areas surrounding Aden as a defensive buffer against foreign influence. Agreements made by the British and Ottoman Empires in 1905, and later in 1914 set geographical boundaries between North and South Yemen; but just as important, the agreements recognized specific tribes as under the protection of the British, thus creating a sociopolitical division between the two Yemens.³² The so-called "nine tribes" associated with the border area included the 'Abdali, 'Aqrabi, 'Alawi, Amiri, 'Awlaqi, Fadli, Hawshabi, Subayhi, and the Yafi'i' tribes.³³ In addition to these tribes, which would come to make up the Western Aden Protectorate (WAP), areas east including the culturally significant Hadramawt province would make up the Eastern Aden Protectorate

³¹ John M. Willis, "Leaving Only Question-marks," 128-129.

³² Ibid. 124. The Joint Anglo-Turkish Boundary Commission of 1902-1905 officially delineated the North-South boundary between the Aden Protectorates and Yemen. The "Violet Line" line which extends at a 45 degree angle to the Northeast of the Protectorates was agreed upon in 1914. John T. Ducker and others, *Without Glory in Arabia: The British Retreat from Aden* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 12.

³³ While appearing to be an irrelevant list of long defunct tribal names, a few of these tribes have appeared in recent headlines as being associated with the resurgence of al Qaeda, including the Awlaqi and Fadli tribes. List of nine tribes given in R.J. Gavin, *Aden Under British Rule, 1839-1967* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1975), 127.

(EAP). Together these two protectorates would form the defensive hinterland which was meant to buffer the port of Aden from the Ottomans, and more importantly, from the Imamate.

Although the British had agreements with the Ottomans which demarcated geographical boundaries, Imam Yahya unabashedly pushed his temporal and physical rule southwards. The Imam intentionally stirred up tribal discontent in the border region, and in 1915 even going as far as capturing Lahaj, a small town on the Northern doorstep of Aden.³⁴ It was not until 1934 that the then independent Imamate signed an agreement with the British Empire officially recognizing the North-South boundary.³⁵ The Ottoman presence in northern Yemen in the late 19th century, followed by the Imamates continual claims to Aden in the early 20th century, gave the British all the motivation they needed to use the tribal areas surrounding Aden as a defensive buffer. Yet as they developed their colony in Aden, the surrounding protectorates were left in a state of legal limbo: a staggering total of ninety treaties defined the complex relationship between the British and the tribal areas, which consisted of less than one million inhabitants.³⁶ The resulting social divide between the hinterlands and the Crown Colony would ultimately cause an irreconcilable rift and set North and South Yemen down very different political paths.

C. CEMENTING THE DIVISIONS: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL REVOLUTION, 1962–1970

The unique fates awaiting North and South Yemen during the 20th century were to solidify the divisions formed during the imperial era. The independent path of northern Yemen after WWI was in stark contrast to the imperialist fate which fell upon the rest of the Middle East. The Imamate was declared independent in 1918, and for the next thirty years until Imam Ahmed took over for his father Yahya, the Mutawakkil Kingdom remained a clannishly isolated society. In contrast, the South remained under the influence of the British Empire, but after WWII as the Eastern holdings of the Empire began to break free, Aden's value to the British was in question. However, as the rest of

³⁴ Joseph Kostiner, *The Struggle for South Yemen* (New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1984), 4.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 37.

the Arab world began to gain their independence, the British doggedly held on to their territory in and around Aden. Events of the 1960s would prove to be revolutionary for both North and South Yemen; and as the dust settled, two vastly different nations emerged. In the end, the northern Zaydi elites and tribal sheiks climbed to prominence and they “remain dominant in the country today.”³⁷

1. The North

North Yemen has remained a unique state in the Middle East beginning with its incarnation as the Mutawakkil Kingdom in the post Ottoman era. Independence from European imperialism during that period was the exception rather than the rule in the Middle East. Except for Turkey, the rest of the former Ottoman Empire had been carved up and divided among the victorious European powers. Northern Yemen had remained an independent Imamate; and a xenophobic one at that. Imam Yahya not only limited foreign exposure inside of Yemen, but he also forbade travel outside of the country until 1947.³⁸ Both Imam Yahya and his son Ahmed were able to consolidate their power and secure their border areas during this time by subjugating the smaller tribes and forming alliances with the two main tribal confederations; the Hashid and Bakil.³⁹ These strong tribal relationships would endure throughout the revolution and civil war of the 1960s, and make it possible for the tribes to embed themselves into the contemporary governing system of Yemen.

The revolution which ejected the Imamate from power in North Yemen was the result of a perfect storm of sociopolitical events. First, after the death of Imam Yahya, his son Ahmed began to break from the isolationist tradition of his father. This new ‘openness’ along with the rise of the pan-Arab movement led by Egyptian President Gamal Nasser, had thrust Yemen into a new era of modernity. Ahmed had unknowingly placed Yemen’s fate into the hands of a foreign government by signing on as a member

³⁷ Stephen Day, *The Political Challenge of Yemen’s Southern Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), 3.

³⁸ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective*, 43.

³⁹ Robert D. Burrowes, “Prelude to Unification: The Yemen Arab Republic, 1962–1990,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (1991): 483–506.

of the United Arab States, a new Arab confederation headed by the United Arab Republic (Egypt and Syria).⁴⁰ The most significant part of this new partnership was the renaissance of sociopolitical ideas taught to Yemeni military officers who were being trained and educated in Egypt. The death of Imam Ahmed in September 1962 opened the flood gates of change into North Yemen. With a frenzied nationalist fervor, the Yemeni military saw their chance to ride the Nasserist wave into power.

The September revolt, and the subsequent civil war, changed a long standing paradigm in North Yemen. After centuries of rule by the Zaydi Imamate, the newly declared Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) came under military rule. And for the first time in modern history, the loyalties of the major tribal confederations were split.⁴¹ This did not mean that the tribal loyalties were steadfast; on the contrary, they often shifted their loyalties based on who offered the best financing.⁴² But in the end the tribes became the backbone to the so called “Royalist” camp, and they were responsible for bogging down the Egyptian forces sent by Nasser to defend the new Arab Republic. In an extremely destructive civil war, the tribal confederations managed to come out on top.

The North Yemen Civil War is often overlooked by Middle Eastern historians, but its significance to the region, and Yemen in particular, cannot be underestimated. A full survey of the war is not necessary in this study, merely a review of its significant sociopolitical aftereffects. However, a brief review is necessary to provide historical context to current issues, and to highlight the pitfalls of using large conventional armies to suppress tribally entrenched insurgencies. As discussed in Chapter five, President Saleh’s use of the military to suppress tribally entrenched cells of AQAP has produced similar results.

The Egyptian intervention in Yemen began in October 1962, shortly after the September revolt. Nasser described the resulting quagmire as his “Vietnam,” and rightfully so. At its peak involvement in 1965, Egypt had deployed 70,000 troops to

⁴⁰ Mohammed A. Zabarah, “The Yemeni Revolution of 1962 seen as a Social Revolution,” in *Contemporary Yemen: Politics and Historical Background*, ed. P.R. Prinham (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), 78.

⁴¹ Ibid., 80.

⁴² Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 99.

Yemen; approximately one third of the entire Egyptian Army.⁴³ The army was ill prepared to fight in Yemen, even lacking basic maps of the country; they were even surprised to find themselves in mountainous terrain rather than the expected desert conditions they had planned on.⁴⁴

The regular Egyptian Army was trained to fight a conventional war on the deserts of the Sinai Peninsula, but they found themselves trapped in the cat and mouse game of counterinsurgency in the rugged terrain of North Yemen. The Egyptian response to tribal warfare was a scorched earth policy, including the use of chemical weapons on civilian populations in the northern highlands.⁴⁵ Yet these types of tactics only entrenched the tribal forces. In the end, the Egyptians were never able to subdue the tribes, or the Saudi backed “Royalist” forces. Many high ranking Egyptian officers blame the quagmire in Yemen for their devastating defeat in the 1967 Six Day War: a defeat which Nasser never recovered from.⁴⁶ In a lucid reflection of the intervention, Egyptian Field Marshal al-Amer stated: “After years of experience we realized that it was a war between tribes and that we entered it without knowing the nature of their land, their traditions and their ideas.”⁴⁷

Although Egypt withdrew from Yemen in 1967, the civil war between the military led Republic, and the tribally backed Royalists lasted for another three years; ending with a significant reconciliation. In 1969 “a group of what the historian Fred Halliday calls “tribalist republicans”—General al-Amri, President Abdul Rahman al-Iryani and Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar were in a strong enough position to extend a conciliatory hand to the Royalists.”⁴⁸ The conciliatory government of the YAR was vastly different than the Imamate which was in power in 1962; and it was a departure

⁴³ David M. Witty, “A Regular Army in Counterinsurgency Operations: Egypt in North Yemen, 1962-1967,” *The Journal of Military History* 65, no. 2 (April, 2001): 401-439.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 97.

⁴⁶ David M. Witty, “A Regular Army in Counterinsurgency Operations,” 401-439.

⁴⁷ Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 100.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 101. The rise of Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar is of great significance due to his leadership of the Hashid tribal confederation. He would entrench the northern tribes in Yemen’s government until his death in 2007.

from the Nasserist style government which had taken control after the coup. The new tribally anchored government mixed modernity with tribal hierarchies and societal norms, and it was in a position to counter the new Marxist state of South Yemen which had finally gained its independence from the British in 1967. The divisions between the North and South were solidified with ideological differences which are still in place today.

2. The South

The road to independence for the South led them in a vastly different direction than the North. The rise of a socialist society, and a Marxist government resulted in the marginalization of tribalism. The shift in societal norms produced the fractionalized population which resides in the area today. But prior to their Marxist slant, the southern revolutionaries were allied with the Nasserists in the North. Early resistance to British control was backed by Nasser in an effort to provide a “southern flank” to his war in North Yemen. Initially both the YAR and opposition groups in the South had joined forces in the name of pan-Arabism and a united Yemen. But as Nasser’s influence began to wane, southern political groups began to lean more to the left and adopt Marxist and Maoist worldviews. For their part, the British had been powerless to stop a revolt which would ultimately push them out of Aden and usher in a Marxist regime in South Yemen.

British efforts to form the independent and Anglo-friendly nation of South Arabia ended in disaster, leading to their withdrawal in 1967. After WWII the British maintained their colony in Aden despite the receding nature of European imperialism. In particular, British holdings “east of Suez” were gaining independence, including India in 1947. Instead of giving up its strategically located port, the British decided to develop Aden as the Middle East Headquarters for its military. In lieu of keeping Aden as a permanent colony, they devised a plan to build a nation from the East and West Protectorates; with the ultimate goal of adding South Arabia as a Commonwealth nation.

Yet attempts to create an independent nation on their own terms had failed. The initial steps at building the South Arabian nation started with the formation of a Federation of states in 1959. The Federation of South Arabia was an attempt at giving the protectorates political autonomy with the aim of uniting them with Aden. Ironically

their earlier strategy of isolating Aden from the tribally controlled protectorates came back to haunt them. Within the socially divided groups residing in the urban areas of Aden, as well as in the hinterland; Arab nationalism had led both groups to resist further British control. A revolt in the Fahlan region north of Aden in 1963 was the beginning of the end for British control of its colony. Out of the revolt came the main opposition group, the National Liberation Front (NLF), which aligned itself with pan-Arab goals and gained support from Nasser.

In a maneuver being replicated by AQAP, the NLF sought to take advantage of the rift between tribes and the ruling sultans of the protectorate. The British had been coopting the sultans, emirs and sheiks of the tribal regions for decades and intentionally withholding any developmental aid to the hinterlands.⁴⁹ The narrative of the NLF fit perfectly with that of the pan-Arab movement, and it provided plenty of incentive for the disenfranchised population of the protectorates. Initially, both the Egyptians and the NLF had their sights set on unifying the two Yemens; but as Nasser began to lose influence, and the British signaled their plans to depart Yemen, the NLF began to radicalize their political ideologies.

A defense “white paper” released by the British in 1966 signaled the end of their presence in Yemen, and led to a scramble for power within South Yemen. The white paper announced the end of all agreements between the Federation of South Arabia by 1968, thus leaving the coopted leaders of the protectorates high and dry. With British power in South Yemen marginalized, the opposition groups began to vie for influence through the use of violence. The NLF was not the only group vying for power however; their main competitor was the Front for the Liberation of South Yemen (FLOSY). Egypt had made attempts to nudge the two groups together, but their attempts at merger had revealed a rift in the leadership of the NLF. A “secondary leadership” emerged which espoused a Marxist view, and a claim as the true leaders of the movement.⁵⁰ While

⁴⁹ Mohammed A. Zabarah, “The Yemeni Revolution of 1962 Seen as a Social Revolution,” 89.

⁵⁰ Josheph Kostiner, *The Struggle for South Yemen*, 120.

Nasser attempted to unify FLOSY and the NLF in order to strengthen his hand in North Yemen, the two groups instead went to war with each other in 1966, and pointed South Yemen down the road to Marxism.⁵¹



Figure 2. North and South Yemen

3. Two Yemeni Nations

The decline of Nasserism after Egypt's defeat in the Six Day War, in addition to the departure of the British from Aden in 1967, left South Yemen in the hands of the Marxist leaning NLF, thus placing the two Yemens on opposite sides of an ideological spectrum. From 1967 through the early 1970s, the newly independent States settled into their own unique forms of government. In the North the Imamate had been transformed into a Republic which not only had the support of the Hashid and Bakil tribal

⁵¹ Robert W. Stookey, *South Yemen: A Marxist Republic in Arabia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), 63.

confederations, but included them in their leadership. Instead of being marginalized as they had been during the Ottoman era, the tribes were now an integral part of the government of the new Republic.

In the South the transition from a British imperialism to statehood went much different than either Great Britain or the Nasser had envisioned. Instead of becoming a southern version of the YAR, South Yemen was quickly transformed into a Marxist society. The NLF which had sought to “eliminate ‘the tribal spirit’”⁵² in the South, had created a socialist state which was ideologically opposed to the tribalism; a societal norm still revered in the North. Interestingly enough, the YAR and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) continued to seek unification throughout the next twenty years. But as the new states settled on their respective forms of government, divisions between the anti-tribal socialists of the South, and the tribally infused government of the North began to solidify. The practicality of unification did not show itself until the discovery of oil reserves on the border between the two states during the 1980s.⁵³

By the time unification became a political reality in 1990 the North had the upper hand. Its government had been relatively stable since 1978, the year President Ali Abdullah Saleh began his tenure. The YAR’s economy was mostly fed by billions of dollars of remittances from citizens who had been working abroad; most in the oil fields of Saudi Arabia. Their government included multiple political groupings, the most significant being the General People’s Congress, which is still the ruling party of Yemen today.

The South in contrast, was suffering through violent political turmoil. The year 1986 was an especially bloody year for the government and the people of the PDRY. A political purge in the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP), in early 1986 had taken the lives of over 4,000 South Yemeni leaders and citizens. This civil war not only signaled the near death of the Marxist ideology in South Yemen, but it also revealed that tribalism was still alive and well despite twenty years of communist rule. The political disputes between President Ali Nasir and his Soviet backed rival Abd al-Fattah turned into a tribal war

⁵² Joseph Kostiner, *The Struggle for South Yemen*, 84.

⁵³ Robert D. Burrowes, “Prelude to Unification,” 483-506.

between Nasir's Dathina tribe in Abyan, and the Radfani tribe in Lahej.⁵⁴ In the end, a hard-line leader seized power of the southern government and unification seemed to take a back seat to political ideology once more.

A window of opportunity opened up for the two Yemens at the end of the decade. The end of the Cold War and continued cooperation in oil extraction on the border provinces of Marib and Shabwa provided the foundation for unification. The sudden decision to unify in 1990 took the world by surprise. Suddenly, the two states which had traveled down separate paths since 1962 found themselves in an awkward marriage. The sociopolitical divisions cemented by nearly thirty years of separation could not be overlooked for long. The dominant and aggressive northern government took charge in the new Republic of Yemen, and although incorporated into a new pluralistic democracy, the YSP and the tribes of the South found themselves to be a marginalized and exploited population.

D. DEMOCRACY IN YEMEN

The unification of Yemen and the subsequent sociopolitical events which unfolded are pivotal toward understanding the pitfalls of the current U.S. strategy. The political grievances of the southern population reside in the flawed unification process and the resulting civil war.⁵⁵ Efforts to reform Yemen's government should start from the conditions of 1990; and the Saleh regime's trend of using force to solve political disputes should raise a warning flag as the U.S. attempts to boost Yemen's security sector prior to political reform. This period also demonstrates the government of Yemen's concerted efforts to marginalize the South, thus disputing the assumption in U.S. policy that the Saleh regime is willing to proceed with a transparent and responsive government. The unification and civil war period underscores the divisions which need to be reconciled before the northern-centric security arm of President Saleh is built up via U.S. assistance.

⁵⁴ Tribes aligning with Nasir also included the Fadhlis, the Aulaqis and Audhalis. In Lahed, the Radfani, yafai and Dhali tribes backed al-Fattah. Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 126.

⁵⁵ Steven Day, *The Political Challenge of Yemen's Southern Movement*, 3.

There have not been many instances in history where the unification of a nation has caused more division than goodwill; but this describes the 1990 union between the YAR and PDRY. The period from 1990–1994 can be directly correlated to the current turmoil in Yemen. Even though the new Republic of Yemen emerged as the first Democracy on the Arabian Peninsula, leading the New York Times to proclaim after the 1993 parliamentary elections, “Something wonderful has happened in Yemen;” yet there was something rotten in Sana’a.⁵⁶ Although the announced democratization brought praise and financial aid from the international community, the new Republic of Yemen was cut down in its youth after voting against the U.S. led military efforts to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. The resulting economic catastrophe mortally wounded Yemen, and it still haunts the country to this day. The inevitable civil war which ensued during the spring of 1994 forcefully stopped the secession of the South, but the postwar ‘union’ left southern Yemen in a weak and dangerous position, widening rifts between the tribal networks and the Saleh regime in the North. The wounds of unification and civil war left the door open for militant Islamist influence, separatist movements and insurrection; characteristics which define the sociopolitical landscape of Yemen today.

The reasons behind the rushed unification of Yemen are still under debate. While some believe that President Saleh and General Secretary Ali Salem al-Bidh were both guilty of using the unification for their own short term political leverage;⁵⁷ others contend that after a successful decade of growth in the North, President Saleh was able to finally operate from a position of strength against the PDRY which had been economically and politically weakened after the withdraw of Soviet support.⁵⁸ There is truth to both of these explanations, but they are not the only reasons for Yemen’s ‘shotgun wedding.’

The YAR and the PDRY had been operating under an ethos of cooperation; initiating efforts toward political coordination and integration years before the 1990

⁵⁶ “A Real Arab Revolution,” *The New York Times* (8 May 1993), <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/08/opinion/a-real-arab-revolution.html?scp=5&sq=yemen&st=nyt> (accessed August 10, 2010).

⁵⁷ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective*, 48.

⁵⁸ Steven Day, “The Political Challenge of Yemen’s Southern Movement,” 4.

unification.⁵⁹After oil was discovered on the border region in 1984, both nations had cooperated to develop and extract the oil, but underlying tensions continued to erupt into a border war. In order to avoid conflict, a “neutral zone” was set up on the border region in 1988. Additionally, citizens of both countries could freely pass across the border. There was also integration of power grids between the North and South, and talk of setting up cooperative use of the oil refinery in Aden.⁶⁰ The cooperation between the two Yemens reached its peak by the time unification talks commenced in earnest. But the cooperation was not occurring merely out of good will. Both nations had something to gain by unification; unfortunately, the South had much to lose.

At the end of the 1980s, President Saleh was in a position to expand his power into South Yemen. Robert Burrowes asserts that several socioeconomic variables helped place Yemen in a position of power over the PDRY. First, workers’ remittances produced “widespread consumption and prosperity” among the general population in the YAR. Instead of money being distributed to the elite few within society, remittances were placed in the hands of the citizens and spread evenly across the country. Second, the newly formed Central Bank and the restructuring of the Yemen Bank for Reconstruction and Development, gave the government two institutions which were able to successfully handle foreign aid. And finally, the responsible handling of the new oil income helped strengthen the nation’s economy: oil revenue went towards investment within Yemen, rather than straight to the political elite.⁶¹ Riding the economic success, Saleh had the momentum he needed to push for a quick union with a weakened South.

In contrast to the YAR, the PDRY was suffering economically due to political change. As the Soviet Union began to decline, the PDRY was one of the many client states which lost financial and political support. The worldwide decline of communism came only a few years after the ‘January events of 1986,’ which weakened the leadership

⁵⁹ Robert D. Burrowes, “Prelude to Unification: The Yemen Arab Republic 1962-1990,” 483-506.

⁶⁰ Robert D. Burrowes, “Prelude to Unification: The Yemen Arab Republic 1962-1990,” 483-506.

⁶¹ Ibid.

base of the country. The economic turmoil resulting from these events gave Ali Salem al-Bidh and the PDRY all the motivation they needed to unify with the relatively prosperous north.⁶²

Beyond the power politics and the economics, both Yemens pursued a quick union in order to avoid conflict. Both Saleh and al-Bidh believed that the only way to avoid another border war, especially over the new oil fields, was unification.⁶³ Whether the unification helped avoid a war, or just delay it, is up for debate. For the short term, conflict was avoided and unification seemed to be advantageous for both nations. Regardless of the reasons for unification, the flawed nature of the process continues to affect the Republic of Yemen.

In a rushed process from November 1989 to May 1990, the long sought unification of Yemen was made official on 22 May 1990. Although the process of unification had been going off and on since 1972, including a draft constitution which was created in 1981, it took only six months to finalize the union. Against the better judgment of the PDRY, which had preferred a long transition period, President Saleh “rushed and bullied” al-Bidh into the shortened timeline.⁶⁴ Despite providing a democratic framework for government, the unification agreement put off several key processes which would prove fatal. First and foremost, the militaries of each independent Yemen had not been unified into one force. Instead they remained under the command of their respective authorities, and rather than integrate forces, select units from each military would switch positions across the border. In addition to the military segregation, governmental segregation occurred as well. The power-sharing agreement favored the more populous north; and with parliamentary elections set for only two years after unification, the Yemen Socialist Party representing the south was at a distinct disadvantage. The political and military segregations were only amplified by world events which put Yemen in the hot seat.

⁶² Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*, 48.

⁶³ Brian Whitaker, “National Unity and Democracy in Yemen: A Marriage of Convenience,” *Al-Bab*, <http://www.al-bab.com/yemen/artic/bw1.htm> (accessed August 19, 2010). Robert D. Burrows, “Prelude to Unification,” 483-506.

⁶⁴ Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 134; Robert D. Burrows, “Prelude to Unification,” 483-506.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990 was not only devastating to the combatants; an equally destructive fate befell Yemen. The new Republic of Yemen was at the wrong place at the wrong time when it comes to international politics. A longtime partner with Iraq and Saddam Hussein, President Saleh found himself in an uncomfortable position. Yemen found itself on the Security Council at the time of the UN resolutions which authorized force against Iraq, and instead of falling in line with the U.S. and other Arab nations such as Egypt, Saleh decided to stand his ground and push for a peaceful “Arab solution” to the crisis. Yemen’s ‘no’ vote on UN Resolution 687 led to economic ruin for the new Republic.⁶⁵

The financial cost of Yemen’s first foray into international politics was the loss of \$70 million of annual aid from the U.S.; but even worse, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait sent home the millions of Yemeni oil workers whose remittance money was so vital to the Yemeni economy. While the U.S. has a short memory with such matters, the Saudis and Kuwaitis do not. As will be covered in a later chapter, the U.S. has recommenced aid to Yemen, but the rest of the Arabian Peninsula is not as forthcoming. The economic hole grew even deeper after the war as oil prices dropped, devaluing what little oil production Yemen was able to squeeze out. As the economic picture dimmed, so too did the chances for a vibrant democracy.

The unification process continued despite the economic bad luck, but the flaws of the process reared their ugly head. In the run-up to parliamentary elections in 1993, political violence in Sana’a led the leaders of the YSP, including Vice President al-Bidh, to evacuate the capital and re-form in Aden. The political process continued and the vote went as scheduled in April 1993. The election was deemed free and fair by the multitude of observers, but the results were predictable. The president’s GPC received 40% of the seats, while the YSP received only 20%.⁶⁶ Even though the YSP respected the results and seated their members, the two sides were sliding towards confrontation.

By August 1993 another political crisis erupted as al-Bidh suddenly left for Aden once again, this time leaving behind a list of 18 grievances he wanted addressed before he

⁶⁵ Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 136.

⁶⁶ Robert D. Burrowes, “The Republic of Yemen: The Politics of Unification and Civil War,” in *Middle East Dilemma*, ed. Michael C. Hudson (New York, NY: Tauris & Co., 1999)

would come back.⁶⁷ Despite the mediation efforts of Egypt, Oman, and the UAE, the crisis dragged on for a year without reconciliation. On the first anniversary of the 1993 vote, a battle erupted between the still segregated militaries. Events slid out of control and the crisis slipped into a civil war.

E. CIVIL WAR

The 1994 Civil War was the culmination of the flawed unification process, and its outcome only deepened the rift between North and South. Al-Bidh formally announced the South's secession, and the formation of the Democratic Republic of Yemen on May 21, 1994. In late July, the South fell to President Saleh's forces and the Republic of Yemen was forcefully unified. The military details of the war are not as important as the political consequences. President Saleh and the central government of Yemen proceeded to amend the constitution to marginalize the YSP and consolidate power in the North.⁶⁸ Since the end of the 1994, southern Yemen seems to be paying dearly for its secession: Oil revenue from southern oil fields is being redistributed to the northern patronage system and the YSP has remained a beaten political force. Despite the oil revenue from the South, the economic condition of Yemen as a whole has declined. The revenue and the institutions to handle the revenue are deteriorating rapidly.

Ironically, an unlikely ally of Saleh during the civil war is now entrenching itself in the south, taking advantage of the grievances caused by the flawed unification and the civil war. The Afghan Arabs, fresh from their success in the Soviet-Afghan War were more than willing to team with Saleh to defeat the "Marxist" YSP during the civil war. But as the rifts between the north and south continue to grow those same militants have turned their attention to Saleh, the Yemeni government, and beyond.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Robert D. Burrowes, "The Republic of Yemen: The Politics of Unification and Civil War," in *Middle East Dilemma*, ed. Michael C. Hudson (New York, NY: Tauris & Co., 1999)

⁶⁸ Robert D. Burrowes, "The Republic of Yemen: The Politics of Unification and Civil War," in *Middle East Dilemma*, ed. Michael C. Hudson (New York, NY: Tauris & Co., 1999)

⁶⁹ The importance of the Afghan Arabs and the rise of AQAP are discussed at length in Chapter Five.

F. CONCLUSION

An analysis of Yemen's history provides three key points which should form the core assumptions of U.S. policy. First, Yemen has never been a naturally unified State; the divisions between northern and southern societies are not a recent manifestation. The divisions have certainly been solidified through imperial competition as well as contrasting political ideologies, but the people of Yemen have only recently been thrown together into one nation. Second, the Zaydi and tribal confederations of the North have always had a dominating influence in government. The traditional Hashid and Bakil tribal confederations have held great sway throughout Yemen's contemporary history. This is no different today as President Saleh, the ruling party, the military elite, and even the leadership of the 'opposition' are all connected to these dominating tribal hierarchies. Third, the 1990 unification and subsequent civil war have magnified the traditional rifts between North and South; thus President Saleh will not likely provide the same responsiveness to the southern population as he does with the North.

The three formative periods of Yemen's history have shaped the sociopolitical characteristics of the country today. Since the end of the civil war Yemen has settled into a status quo of a transitional democratic State; but as the next chapter will illustrate, democracy has become a façade for President Saleh's authoritarian control. U.S. policy makers have not necessarily been fooled by the veneer, but the strategy toward Yemen has presumed that the ruling party is marching towards a more open polity. As history has shown, the grip of northern rule may be difficult to break.

III. THE OBSTACLES TO REFORM: DEMOCRACY, PLURALISM, AND THE PATRONAGE SYSTEM IN YEMEN

“Ruling Yemen is like Dancing on the heads of snakes.”

-President Ali Abdullah Saleh⁷⁰

There are two contrasting sides to the government of Yemen: The first is the image of a promising pluralistic democracy representative of the people; and the second is the authoritarian rule of President Saleh and the northern elite. Unfortunately the former has become a façade for the latter, and although the U.S. may acknowledge this, the strategy initiated by the NSC has assumed that President Saleh prefers democracy over authoritarianism. This assumption would have to be true in order to achieve what the U.S. considers to be the overarching goal of development and security assistance in Yemen; “to improve stability and security by improving governance and helping to meet pressing socio-economic challenges.”⁷¹ The improvement in governance, as mentioned previously, is to increase the transparency and responsiveness of the government. Yet, without a willing and honest partner in Yemen’s government, these objectives cannot be achieved.

There have been efforts to forge honesty and openness in Yemen’s government: The U.S. has stated that their solution to reducing the corruption within the Yemeni government is to work with ‘relevant’ institutions such as the National Audit Board and the Supreme National Anti Corruption Commission.⁷² But are these truly ‘relevant’ institutions within the government? A review of Yemen’s governmental structure will show that these and other democratic institutions are a veneer to placate the international community. An analysis of the government will also highlight that the true ‘institutions of relevance’ are used to control the vast patronage system of President Saleh. While the amount of foreign aid to Yemen has increased substantially as part of the U.S. strategy

⁷⁰ President Saleh interview with London’s Al-Hayat newspaper, 28 March 2009 as quoted in Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, xi.

⁷¹ House Committee, *Yemen on the Brink: Implications for U.S. Policy*, 12.

⁷² Ibid. 13.

toward Yemen, the utilization of security assistance is outpacing the developmental funding. This has served to strengthen President Saleh's authoritarian rule.

This chapter will show that President Saleh and his ruling party have used the democratic foundations of Yemen's government as a veneer for their patronage-based system of authoritarian rule. Consequently, they are more than willing to accept security assistance and foreign aid, while only half heartedly pushing for viable reform. Most importantly, the quick buildup of the security apparatus prior to achieving tangible political reform has provided the Saleh regime with the means to suppress political opposition in the South.

The discussion will begin with a look at the foundations of democracy in Yemen, including the governmental structure as envisioned by the constitution. Then, there will be a review of the political parties within the government, including the evolution and viability of opposition groups. After reviewing the democratic structure, the analysis of government will uncover the importance of the patronage system under President Saleh; including the cooptation of security, the divisive nature of patronage in the South, and finally the effects of shrinking revenue on the system. Ultimately the analysis shows that the assumptions inherent within the U.S. strategy toward Yemen are not in line with the true characteristics of Yemen's system of governance; and more importantly, that the flow of security assistance has outpaced government reform, therefore bolstering the authoritarian regime at the expense of good governance.

A. THE FOUNDATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

One of the tenets of U.S. strategy toward Yemen is to help build a more responsive, decentralized democracy: If this is the case, all they have to do is dust off the Republic's original 1990 constitution, where all the tools are in place to achieve this goal.⁷³ But the pluralized democracy which was formed in Yemen in 1990 has been shelved in favor of a more authoritarian rule by President Saleh and the GPC party. The authoritarian rule has tended to isolate the southern political movements and consolidate

⁷³ In a speech entitled "U.S. Counterinsurgency Strategy in Yemen," Daniel Benjamin states, "Ultimately the goal of U.S. and international efforts is a stable, secure, and effectively governed Yemen." Daniel Benjamin, "U.S. Counterinsurgency Strategy in Yemen."

power in the North. A comparison of the pre-war constitution and the 1994 amended version shows the deliberate move towards a more centralized government. These amendments not only shifted power towards the executive branch, but they paved the way to marginalizing the South politically and socially.

The ratification of the Republic's first constitution in 1991 was a promising start to the only democracy on the Arabian Peninsula; but as regional rivalries dirtied the first elections in 1993, the fragile unity began to disintegrate. The political turmoil surrounding the 1993 parliamentary results was nearly rectified by a coordinated effort from within the government. The National Dialog of Political Forces made up of "respected northern elites" developed a solution to the crisis via the Document of Pledge and Accord.⁷⁴ This agreement "called for further limits to executive power, a bicameral legislature, and greater decentralization of power."⁷⁵ If enacted, this agreement would have resulted in greater representation for the southern based YSP, and less influence from the executive branch. As it was, the government's executive branch was comprised of a Presidential Council of five members selected by the House of Representatives.⁷⁶ Since the YSP only received 18% of the seats in the House due to the disproportionately small size of the southern electorate, they were only able to hold two out of five positions on the Presidential Council. The widespread support for the Document of Pledge and Accord became irrelevant after the civil war broke out in May 1994. Yet the original constitution, and the governing body's willingness to amend it in order to provide a more pluralistic democracy, proved that the Republic of Yemen has the capacity and foundation for a responsive and effective democracy if left unhampered.

Not only had the South lost militarily in the civil war, but they were also decimated politically through constitutional amendment. Instead of amending the constitution to decentralize power, as proposed by the Document of Pledge and Accord, the 1994 amendment consolidated power with the president and diminished the influence

⁷⁴ Sarah Phillips, *Evaluating Political Reform in Yemen* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007), 7.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ *The Constitution of Yemen*, Article 82, (May 1991) <http://www.al-bab.com/yemen/gov/off2.htm> (accessed 21 October 2010).

of the House of Representatives. “The amendments abolished the Presidential Council and broadened the powers of the president. The Presidential Council, which in the 1991 constitution was a five-member body elected by the parliament, was replaced by the Consultative Council (Majlis al Shura), whose 59 (now 111) members are appointed by the president.”⁷⁷ The amendments which were ratified in September 1994, only two months after the guns fell silent in the civil war, changed a total of fifty two clauses and added twenty nine.⁷⁸ In addition to the political changes, the socially progressive legal code adopted from the YSP was deleted.⁷⁹ The changes to the constitution were a deliberate step by President Saleh and the GPC to marginalize the YSP after the war. The resulting government was a pluralistic authoritarianism with Saleh ruling over the country with little if any political opposition. From 1994 onward, President Saleh presided over a robust patronage system which drained the resources of the south. As stated by Sarah Phillips, “[t]he consolidation of the patronage system is one of the most important legacies of the postwar period and probably the most antithetical to the development of democracy.”⁸⁰

The Republic of Yemen’s initial constitution, along with the amendments proposed by the Document of Pledge and Accord, gave Yemen the framework for a pluralistic democracy but it was ‘shelved’ in order to eliminate political influence from the South. Current U.S. and international policy toward Yemen makes two assumptions: first, that a decentralized form of government needs to be *created*; and second, that Ali Abdullah Saleh *wants* help with creating a decentralized government. The reality is, as discussed above, a more decentralized form of government already exists, but was shelved intentionally by Saleh. Therefore it may be flawed thinking to assume that he wants to dust off the old constitution and give his southern rivals equality in governance once again. The existence of a multi-party political system may appear to be a promising

⁷⁷ Sarah Phillips, *Evaluating Political Reform in Yemen*, 7.

⁷⁸ Note from al-bab website, Republic of Yemen Constitution, <http://www.al-bab.com/yemen/gov/con94a.htm> (accessed 21 October, 2010).

⁷⁹ Sarah Phillips, *Evaluating Political Reform in Yemen*, 7.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 8.

harbinger of reform, but as long as Saleh is unwilling to share power with southern leaders, the pluralistic government will continue to be unresponsive to the disenfranchised South.

B. YEMEN'S POLITICAL PARTIES

The political parties which occupy the Yemeni House of Representatives have been used to present a “veneer of Democracy” to the population and the international community.⁸¹ Even though the Republic of Yemen has the framework for a pluralistic democracy, President Saleh and his ruling party in parliament choose to maintain a highly centralized, authoritarian form of government. The GPC has remained an umbrella political party for those loyal to the president, and it has run into little opposition since the 1990 unification; with only the YSP offering a miniscule voice of dissent in the government. Ironically, in an effort to eliminate political opposition from the YSP shortly after unification, Saleh helped create the Islah party (or Reform Gathering).⁸² Not only did Islah help counter Saleh's most potent rival, but it also bolstered the image of a pluralistic democracy. Less than a decade later Islah would ally itself with YSP and a grouping of other diverse political parties, to form the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) coalition. The emergence of the JMP in 1997 is evidence that the seeds of democracy planted in 1990 are still able to break through and challenge the divisive rule. The JMP has given Yemen its most influential and effective opposition group so far.⁸³ Yet even with the opposition, President Saleh has been able to manipulate the institutions of government in order to consolidate power in the North.

Opposition to Saleh and his ruling GPC party has been hard to come by since the unification in 1990. The president's first attempt at covering up the absence of a truly democratic system was to develop the Islah party as an alternative to the GPC umbrella

⁸¹ Sarah Phillips, *Evaluating Political Reform in Yemen*, 9.

⁸² Robert Burrows and Catherine M. Kasper, “The Salih regime and the Need for a Credible Opposition,” *Middle East Journal* 61, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 272.

⁸³ According to Robert Burrows the official appearance of the JMP was in 2002, but Michaelle Browers places it in 1997 when the name was first being used by coalition members. Michaelle Browers, “Origins and Architects of Yemen's Joint Meeting Parties,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 39 (2007): 565-586; Robert D Burrows and Catherine M. Kasper, “The Salih regime and the Need for a Credible Opposition.”

group, and to counter the YSP from the south. Yet Islah was almost as loyal to Saleh as the GPC. The party was primarily made up of northern tribal elite, as well as Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood who were extremely hostile to the YSP; and as will be discussed in a later chapter, certain factions within Islah even rallied veterans from the Afghan war to fight the YSP in the 1994 civil war.⁸⁴

Islah was led by one of the most influential northerners in the country, Sheik Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar. His position as leader of the Hashid tribal confederation, which includes President Saleh's *Sanhan* tribe, gave him the ability to speak against the government without repercussion, but his political loyalties always ended up with the president.⁸⁵ The coalition government formed between Islah and GPC prior to the civil war was meant to counter the opposition posed by the YSP; but after the civil war there was an interesting turn of events which led to the formation of a valid opposition group in the Yemeni Parliament.

The unexpected union between Islah and YSP in 1997 produced the first legitimate opposition group which could effectively challenge President Saleh and the GPC. Islah and the YSP's coalition came to be called the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) and also included several minor parties, including a conservative Zaydi group from the North, as well as Ba'athist and Nasserist groups. The broad aims of the group included the "establishment of a democratic approach toward realization of freedom, pluralism, rule of law, peaceful rotation of power, and respect for human rights;" With an overarching goal of "protection of the democratic life in Yemen."⁸⁶ This surprising coalition was meant to bring back the democratic aims which were expected during the initial unification of the two Yemens. The JMP had unexpected cohesion all the way through the 2006 elections, but despite their desire to bring validity to Yemen's pluralistic democracy, they were still not able to overcome the influence of President Saleh and the GPC.

⁸⁴ Steven Day, "Updating Yemeni National Unity," 421; Michaelle Browers, "Origins and Architects of Yemen's Joint Meeting Parties," 569.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 570.

Although influential members of Islah including Sheik al-Ahmar, still tended to back the northern-leaning leadership of Saleh, moderates within the party were able to partially revive the democratic process. The ‘modernist’ wing of the Islah party was an especially active group among the JMP, giving the coalition its pro-democratic traction.⁸⁷ Three men associated with this wing, Muhammad al-Yadumi, Abd’ al-Wahhab al-Anisi, and Muhammad Qahtan, were particularly vehement in their opposition to the GPC and President Saleh. After the 2003 parliamentary elections Qahtan and al-Yadumi were especially boisterous in their critique of the ruling party. The elections were considered to be fraudulent, as the GPC captured an astonishing 229 out of 301 seats in the House.⁸⁸ Qahtan directly addressed President Saleh by exclaiming, “You, president, were the reason behind this problem, yet it will never be solved [the issue of democracy] if you don’t want to solve it.”⁸⁹ While the JMP gave Yemen’s government a nascent opposition, it is clear by Qahtan’s comments that President Saleh continued to suppress the formation of a truly democratic government. The JMP’s performance leading up to, and after the 2006 elections showed just how close the opposition can come to changing the political landscape in Yemen, and presents a potential ally for U.S. efforts at reform.

The resiliency of the JMP as an opposition force shows signs of hope for Yemen’s democracy, but as President Saleh and the GPC continue to stunt the development of decentralized government the opposition may begin to crumble. The extent of the JMP ability to remain united was evident during the presidential elections in 2006. The group successfully navigated three divisive moments during the election. First, they were able to agree on a credible and popular candidate to run in opposition to the president, and then get approval for his candidacy from the ruling party. After the nomination, the administration began to balk at the agreed upon election date, creating a debate within the

⁸⁷ The term “modernist wing of Islah” is coined by Francois Burgat, “Yemen: On Which Side?” *Le Monde Diplomatique* (April 9, 2003), quoted in Michaelle Browsers, “Origins and Architects of Yemen’s Joint Meeting Parties,” 575.

⁸⁸ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy Experiment*, 60.

⁸⁹ Nasser Arrabyee, “Contentious Poll in Yemen,” *Al-Ahram Weekly* (8-14 May 2003), as quoted in Michaelle Browsers, “Origins and Architects of Yemen’s Joint Meeting Parties,” 575.

JMP of whether to boycott the election entirely.⁹⁰ To their credit, the JMP stayed united and carried on with the election process. In the end the JMP candidate, Faysal bin Shamlan, received twenty-two percent of the vote; while seemingly low, it was an astonishing feat considering that the election process gave a clear advantage to Saleh. Although the EU considered the vote valid, they noted fraud in many areas and denounced Saleh's use of state resources for his campaign, including "unequal access to the media, the perception of partisanship in electoral administration, and serious gender bias."⁹¹ Despite the seemingly unfair election process, the JMP continued to participate in the government rather than boycotting or dividing.

Recent events within the Yemen government have stretched the JMP unity to its limits, as President Saleh continues to obstruct the democratic process. The parliamentary elections which were scheduled for 2009 were delayed for two years and are on the verge of being postponed once again. The JMP's attempts to reform the electoral process have met with bureaucratic roadblocks which some members of the JMP argue are a deliberate attempt by Saleh to delay the elections, "It is not in the ruling party's best interest to have the elections on time since its popularity is suffering in many governorates around the country."⁹² If the April 2011 elections are pushed back, the JMP has threatened to boycott,⁹³ giving Saleh and the GPC what they want; uncontested elections to provide a veneer of democracy to a pluralistic authoritarian government. Top level discussions between the U.S. and JMP leadership could help to legitimize the opposition and essentially 'call the bluff' of President Saleh.

The foundations of democracy are in place in Yemen, but their growth and development have been constrained through the actions of President Saleh and the GPC. The JMP provides a viable opposition but they are unable to break through the glass

⁹⁰ Robert D. Burrowes and Catherine M. Kasper, "The Salih Regime and the Need for a Credible Opposition," 273.

⁹¹ Robert D. Burrowes and Catherine M. Kasper, "The Salih Regime and the Need for a Credible Opposition," 275.

⁹² A quote by MP Shawqi Al-Qadhi of Islah, Shatha al-Harazi, "Concerns raised over 'limited time' to amend legislation before Yemeni elections," Yemen Times (18 October 2010), http://www.yementimes.com/defaultdet.aspx?SUB_ID=34916 (accessed 20 October, 2010)

⁹³ Ibid.

ceiling within the government, as the ruling party maintains a tight grip on power. The image of democracy has been used by the Saleh regime in order to bring in international support, including foreign aid. Yet this aid only helps to entrench President Saleh's vast system of patronage which has become the true shadow government within Yemen.⁹⁴

C. PATRONAGE IN YEMEN: A SHADOW GOVERNMENT OF INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS

The patronage system in Yemen is the most immovable obstacle to the U.S. strategy toward Yemen. It has given President Saleh a complex web of control which cannot easily be reworked in order to be inclusive to his traditional foes in the South. As long as the system is in place, foreign aid including security assistance will go towards its function. While the U.S. posits that better government capacity will take the place of patronage, this presumes that President Saleh and the northern tribal elites are willing to change for the benefit of the South. As revenue dries up, Saleh fortifies the patronage network with foreign aid money, and uses military aid to suppress internal dissent from the areas which are marginalized. The Southern Movement in particular has become a grievance based revolt, where the unjust practices of the patronage system are an issue of dispute.⁹⁵ In response to the separatist movement the Saleh regime has responded with military force, some of which provided by U.S. security assistance. The northern controlled military apparatus has only exacerbated the suppression of the South. This illustrates the dangers of building up Saleh's security sector prior to reforming the political system.

The neopatrimonial system in place since unification has provided President Saleh a set of informal institutions which have taken the place of democratic institutions run by the central government. This shadow government has favored the northern tribes; the Hashid confederation in particular. By co-opting the tribes, whether northern or southern, Saleh has been able to outsource key government functions such as security and justice. While bringing in over 4,000 tribal sheiks under his patronage, the president has been able to cast a wide net of influence over Yemen. The net had also covered the

⁹⁴ Sarah Phillips, *Evaluating Political Reform in Yemen*, 9.

⁹⁵ Steven Day, "The Political Challenge of Yemen's Southern Movement," 7.

South where Saleh has intentionally revitalized tribalism; but as the resources disappear, the State's influence is receding back to Sana'a. The southern elites are now working outside of the patronage system which has maintained the status quo since the civil war. The decline of the oil based economy has caused the patronage system to recede, but as long as money and aid comes into the government, President Saleh will maintain his shadow government despite the threats of revolt at the periphery.

As the country's resources begin to dry up Saleh has begun to consolidate power around his tribe and family, while at the same time using a "divide and rule" strategy in southern Yemen in order to divert revenue to the North.⁹⁶ The grievances caused by this strategy have resulted in open insurrection in the South, thus widening a rift which is being exploited by secessionists and AQAP. Despite the diminishing resources and the regional divisions, the informal institutions still provide a powerful tool for Saleh to control the events in Yemen, thus making the State stronger than it would otherwise appear.

Despite the references and classifications of Yemen as a "weak state," the informal institutions which make up the patronage system give the president all the control he needs to rule Yemen. The vast patronage system run by Saleh constitutes an alternative form of government in Yemen, and it gives the president a form of control over events within the country. The democratic institutions within the government are used as both a "window dressing" of sorts, as well as a "holding bin" for individuals which Saleh does not wish to have in more influential or threatening positions.⁹⁷ This political patronage tends to appease rival groups but it also diffuses their power. In addition to providing the façade of a pluralistic democracy, the political institutions are also used to distribute patronage amongst the tribal, military, and business elites. The GPC in particular has been known to be a central administrative branch for the patronage system, thus giving the president the capacity to manage such a complex system.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ April Longley Alley, "The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen," *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 386-409.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*, 81.

To say that Saleh's tribal patronage system is "vast" may be an understatement. There are 4,000 to 5,000 tribal sheiks on the government's payroll, each expected to tow the line of the president.⁹⁹ These tribes make up a dispersed shadow government for Saleh which compensates for the lack of strong government institutions throughout the country. As stated by Sarah Phillips, "the Yemeni regime has actually encouraged the move away from its own institutions."¹⁰⁰

The patronage system has provided the State a solid power base, without having to rely on formal institutions.¹⁰¹ In the case of President Saleh, he has used the patronage system to enhance his direct influence in the areas of justice, and security. His manipulation and cooperation with the tribes of both North and South, has given Saleh the ability to maintain his control of the country without ceding power to the democratic system. The State's interaction with the tribes, especially through the patronage system is the key to understanding how Yemen has not as of yet declined into a failed state. Additionally, by understanding his strategy of "*coercion, co-optation, and fragmentation*," it is easy to see how AQAP can fill the vacuum of power left by the State if certain areas, such as in the South, are marginalized.¹⁰²

1. Cooptation of Security Through the Patronage System

It has been noted that Yemen is a weak state because it does not hold the monopoly on violence within its borders, but this assumes the framework of a non-patrimonial state. Instead of using the State's security forces to *coerce* rebellious tribes, which Saleh has shown he can do, he often relies on the *cooptation* of tribes in order to nullify internal security threats.¹⁰³ In an interview for Abu Dhabi Television, President

⁹⁹ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*., 104.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 103.

¹⁰¹ As used by April Longley Alley, "Rules of the Game," Neopatrimonialism is a mode of governance "in which the customs and patterns of patrimonialism co-exist with, and suffuse, rational-legal institutions." Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 62.

¹⁰² For the 'Coercion, Co-optation, Fragmentation' theory see, Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*, 91.

¹⁰³ Saleh's use of force against the tribes of Sa'dah during the Houthi rebellion is an example of the State's ability to project power within its borders; this will be discussed in a later chapter. For the use of tribes in place of security forces see April Longley Alley, "Rules of the Game," 396.

Saleh was quoted as saying, “I have one and a half million tribesmen who, on my command will mobilize with their own guns and ammunition. What use do I have for [soldiers] who...are being stomped in the streets.”¹⁰⁴ But while Saleh may have the ability to call on his tribal patrons, the truth of the matter is that he uses tribal rivalries to slowly grind down any ability the tribes may have to attack the state. By the ‘divide and rule’ or a *fragmentation* strategy, the president is able to limit the power of certain tribes, especially in the South.¹⁰⁵ In contrast to his divide and rule strategy in the South, Saleh has helped empower the Hashid tribal confederation, and his own tribe in particular. This has allowed a robust and loyal State security apparatus to exist; but not the type of security sector which would promote “transparent” or “responsive” governance.

In contrast to developmental funds, security assistance by way of 1206 funds has been applied to specific areas within Yemen’s military complex. In a hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman could not pinpoint where aid money was specifically going in Yemen, other than to say that the money was going to USAID, not directly to the government of Yemen.¹⁰⁶ Yet on the security side, 1206 funding for counterterrorism efforts has been earmarked for air force assets with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, as well as helicopters and the supporting maintenance packages.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, security assistance from the U.S. has been used for training Yemeni Special Forces and counterterrorism units.¹⁰⁸ While in the U.S. frame of reference the training and equipment is a tool to

¹⁰⁴ Cited in Sarah Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy Experiment*, 108. Instead of the term ‘soldiers,’ Saleh uses a phrase which translates into ‘men in pants.’ Which Phillips points out is Yemeni phraseology for men who are not traditional tribesmen.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 94.

¹⁰⁶ House Committee, *Yemen on the Brink*, 17-18.

¹⁰⁷ Statement from Jacob J. Lew, Deputy Secretary of Management and Resources, Briefing on The President’s Proposal for the FY2011 State Department Budget (February 1, 2010). <http://www.state.gov/s/dmr/remarks/2010/136358.htm> (accessed 20 September 2010)

¹⁰⁸ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Security Assistance Reform: ‘Section 1206’ Background and Issues for Congress*, by Nina M. Serafino, Congressional Rep. RS22855, Washington: The Service, June 29, 2010, 6, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22855.pdf> (accessed September 3, 2010).

counter AQAP; but the structure of Yemen's military and its leadership, gives reason to believe that these assets will be used to counter their internal enemies which are more of a priority, such as southern separatists.

In short, the patronage system as applied to the military complex in Yemen does not serve U.S. efforts against al Qaeda. The assumption inherent in U.S. strategy toward Yemen is that building Yemen's security apparatus is essential in shrinking 'ungoverned spaces' and combating AQAP. But strengthening President Saleh's security apparatus is a dangerous road to take.

The patronage system within the military complex has consolidated around the Saleh family and their tribe, thus further alienating and marginalizing groups on the periphery. Key army positions have been awarded to members of Saleh's Sanhan tribe; and more alarmingly, the president is lining his inner circle of military commanders with members of his own family: his son, Amhed is head of the Republican Guard, while his nephews Tarik and Yahya control central security services in charge of protecting Sana'a and the regime.¹⁰⁹ This has produced fears that the democratic process of electing a successor to the president will be pushed aside in favor of Saleh family rule. The military patronage is another example of how the government institutions are looking less like a democracy and more like an autocracy. In addition to the family-centric military postings, the president has favored northern tribes in his patronage system while keeping southern tribal leaders and business elites at arm's length. As the economy has started to dry up, so has the patronage system in the South, thus driving an even larger wedge between the government and the southern tribes.¹¹⁰ The southerners were not always on the periphery of the patronage system, but they have never enjoyed the benefits of the North. The divisions have grown as revenue becomes sparse.

¹⁰⁹ Ginny Hill, *Yemen: Fear of Failure* (Chathamhouse Publications, UK: November, 2008), 4, http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/12576_bp1108yemen.pdf (accessed April 20, 2010).

¹¹⁰ Stephen Day, "The Political Challenge of Yemen's Southern Movement," 7.

2. Divisive Patronage in the South

Subsequent to the civil war in 1994, President Saleh had deliberately revitalized tribalism in the South in order to widen his power base.¹¹¹ As with the northern tribes, co-optation of the southern tribes helped to build a set of informal institutions in lieu of government run processes. Once the patronage system was in place the once strong legal system of the PDRY was intentionally usurped by tribal law.¹¹² Additionally, tribal networks were relied upon to check the power of the YSP, which was still a threat to the GPC and Islah. But even with their usefulness to the government in Sana'a, southerners were still considered a political threat. As a consequence of the civil war, patronage became a 'divide and rule' tactic against the South.¹¹³

As the economy, and especially oil revenue, begins to dry up, the southern population has gotten less and less from the central government; through the patronage system or otherwise. Saleh's consolidation of patronage in the North, and the years of manipulation of the South have produced a number of grievances which threaten the status quo of the informal institutions set up by the president. April Longely Alley notes that more and more tribes, as well as the urban business class in Aden, have begun to operate outside of the patronage system to set up grassroots movements which demand fair treatment and the mediation of grievances.¹¹⁴ The failure of the State to address these grievances outside of the patronage system, gives Islamist militants the opportunity to exploit the rifts between the State and the marginalized southern tribal networks.

D. RELEVANT INSTITUTIONS IN THE PATRONAGE SYSTEM

The once promising oil revenues which helped to spur unification in 1990 are quickly drying up, thus amplifying the many woes of Yemen. What little revenue Yemen receives from its flagging oil assets has disappeared into the patronage abyss created by President Saleh. The budgetary powers given to the democratically elected House of

¹¹¹ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*, 106.

¹¹² Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*, 107.

¹¹³ April Longely Alley, "Rules of the Game," 407.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Representatives have been siphoned into a centralized program which has allowed the president to manipulate the budget as he sees fit.¹¹⁵ In addition to the oil revenue, Yemen is relying heavily on foreign aid which has increased substantially in recent years due to the presence of AQAP. Since the inception of the U.S. strategy toward Yemen, foreign assistance from the United States alone has jumped from \$40 million in 2009, to \$106 million in FY 2011; not including 1206 security assistance funding.¹¹⁶ The dispersal of oil revenue, as well as foreign aid, has been integrated into the patronage system, therefore reaching only those areas which President Saleh deems necessary. The shortage of oil revenue is only one of many problems faced by the government of Yemen; the combination of water shortages and a population explosion has made for a volatile mix.

President Saleh has traditionally used oil revenue to retain the neo-patrimonial system, but the flagging oil reserves have curtailed his reach. As the revenue disappears the patronage system has been consolidated within the northern tribal elite, leaving the South high and dry. The U.S. seeks to build capacity within the financial institutions of Yemen as part of its “two pronged strategy,” but it will be difficult to achieve with President Saleh controlling the purse strings from behind the scenes.

The financial oversight which was built into the constitution has become another window dressing over the past decade. The Ministry of Finance has traditionally been Saleh’s monetary arm within the patronage system. A majority of government transactions have been highly centralized through this ministry, with the minister reporting directly to the president.¹¹⁷ The manipulation of the budget from the Ministry of Finance reflects the authoritarian nature of the administration, and highlights the fact that the Ministry is “the president’s cashier.”¹¹⁸ President Saleh intentionally skirts past provisions in the law which prohibit his manipulation of the budget. The checks and

¹¹⁵ For constitutional authority see The Constitution of the Republic of Yemen, Articles 88-91. Sarah Phillips discusses how the President has consolidated the economy into the patronage system in Sarah Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy Experiment*, 73-76.

¹¹⁶ House Committee, *Yemen on the Brink*, 12.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

balances within the government are meant to create transparency, as Article 89 of Yemen's Constitution states, "[e]very expenditure not provided for in the budget or any additional revenue shall only be authorized by law."¹¹⁹ Of course this is seldom observed; funds for the patronage system are not openly discussed, let alone debated on the floor of parliament.

Tight control of the budget gives President Saleh a coercive tool with which to influence events in lieu of military action.¹²⁰ Paying millions of dollars to tribal sheiks to quell disputes with force is not uncommon. Therefore even if the government cannot deploy security forces around the country, President Saleh has the monetary means to control the "ungoverned spaces" by way of tribal militias. The financial institutions, many of which take in foreign aid money, are used by the president for these purposes. The coercive power of money within the Yemeni system provides Saleh all the motivation he needs to make sure that only his most loyal allies have access to the economic institutions.

Control of the financial institutions has always stayed in the hands of northern officials. Southerners on the other hand, are never appointed to the post of Minister of Finance; therefore they did not have access to the treasury. In an interview with a former member of parliament researcher Floor Beuming highlights how the northern government, the president and the Ministry of Finance in particular, can manipulate the financial system to project their influence: "When Saleh wanted to get something done, for example when he had problems with tribesmen and wanted to pacify them, he would just send a little note to the minister of Finance signed by him saying 'give this sheikh one million riyals.' The sheikh would receive it, and problems were solved. If al-Bidh [the southern leader] would sign a note like that, he would get absolutely nothing."¹²¹ The manipulation of the Ministry of Finance, and thus the budget, gives the executive branch of the government all the revenue they need to continue the patronage system.

¹¹⁹ *The Constitution of the Republic of Yemen*, Article 89.

¹²⁰ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*, 74.

¹²¹ Floor Beuming, "The Merger of the Dagger and the Rifle: Failing Intergration of Former South Yemen into the Unified Republic of Yemen," quoted in Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment*, 74.

The northern-bias of the government has certainly agitated the South, especially since much of the revenue comes from the country's largest oil field in Hadramawt Province.¹²²

With oil revenue being used to support a divisive patronage system, the foreign aid to Yemen may suffer the same fate. In the coming years Yemen's financial well being will be in the hands of foreign donations. Yemen's oil reserves are predicted to dry up within the next decade, leaving foreign aid as their primary source of revenue.¹²³ U.S. aid in 2010 alone will total \$58.4 million, including military as well as developmental aid.¹²⁴ While Yemen has the financial institutions to distribute aid, and developmental projects to put the money to use, the reality is that those institutions are in part a façade to the centralization of the patronage system.

E. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Yemen's government has revealed two key findings which should influence U.S. strategy. First, the democratic foundations of Yemen's government only provide a façade to the true authoritarian rule of President Saleh. Even though the institutions are in place, and the constitution outlines a vibrant representative government, President Saleh has a strong grip on power. But in recent years the JMP has become a viable opposition and has shown the ability to win support from the population, especially in the South. Therefore the U.S. can potentially partner with this group to seek reform and mediate grievances in southern Yemen. Realistically, reform at the top levels of government is problematic since President Saleh has not shown a willingness to provide transparency or responsiveness.

Second, the patronage system is the true power base of the Yemeni government. President Saleh uses cooptation, coercion and fragmentation as the tenets of his patronage

¹²² Stephen Day, *The Political Challenge of Yemen's Southern Movement*, 2.

¹²³ The World Bank Group, "Yemen Quarterly Economic Review," Summer 2010, 10, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTYEMEN/News%20and%20Events/22729847/YEU_Summer2010.pdf (accessed October 15, 2010).

¹²⁴ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy Sharp. Congressional Rep. RL34170, Washington: The Service, November 1, 2010, 28.

system and he has effectively ruled in this manner since entering office in 1978.¹²⁵ This ‘shadow government’ is funded through the northern dominated Ministry of Finance and administered by the GPC; the two truly ‘relevant’ institutions within the government. These institutions have become even more northern-centric as the country’s resources have begun to dry up. The president has consolidated his patronage system in the North, providing northern tribes with the bulwark of support and filling the military’s ranks with his family and fellow tribesmen. This has widened the rift in the South and has forced tribes and social groups in southern Yemen to work outside of the system to alleviate grievances.

These conclusions demonstrate the importance of focusing U.S. strategy on the populations of southern Yemen, and illuminate the perils of building up the government’s security apparatus prior to tangible reforms in governance. The quick employment of security assistance is in contrast to the slow and diffuse application of developmental aid. The relatively rapid addition of a well trained Special Forces element, aircraft with surveillance capabilities, and additional airpower, has provided the president the means to quickly resolve sociopolitical issues with force. Although the government assures the U.S. that its sights are trained on AQAP, the Southern separatists present a more likely target.

The government of Yemen has often affiliated southern separatist movements with AQAP. Indeed the widening divisions within the country have made the South a fertile ground for militant Islamists such as al Qaeda, who use the grievances as fuel for the fire. But how does the radical Islamist ideology of AQAP resonate with the population in southern Yemen; or with the northern population for that matter? Many within the U.S. have called Yemen “a breeding ground” for extremists. But is Yemen truly ripe for radicalization? The following chapter will investigate the place of Islamic fundamentalism, as well as militant Islamism within Yemen.

¹²⁵ For more on the cooptation, coercion and fragmentation strategy see Sarah Phillips, *Yemen’s Democracy Experiment*, 103-111.

IV. ISLAM IN YEMEN: AN INCUBATOR FOR EXTREMISM?

The U.S. strategy toward weak states has drawn broad and monolithic assumptions about the sociopolitical and socioreligious conditions within such states, deeming them ‘incubators’ of terrorism, or ‘breeding grounds’ for militant Islamists. But these assumptions fall short of reality with regards to Yemen.¹²⁶ The traditionally tolerant and flexible nature of the Zaydi and Shafi’i sects of Islam make up the majority of Yemen’s population and have a history of coexistence in the country. Of course this does not mean that fundamentalist movements have been absent in Yemen; the Zaydi revival which began in the 1990s in the northern governorate of Sad’a is proof of that; but there has not been a Zaydi or Shafi’i movement espousing militant Islamist views. Yemen is suffering from a multitude of political, economic, and social problems, all of which contribute to the country’s status as a “weak state.”¹²⁷ But does this mean that the extremist ideology of al Qaeda has found a popular following in the periphery of the country?

This chapter argues that the assumptions inherent in U.S. weak state strategy do not accurately reflect the conditions in Yemen. Yemen’s status as a weak state has not made it an ‘incubator’ for extremists, rather the government itself has facilitated the presence of militant Islamist groups. To begin, a review of Yemen’s religious demographics will provide an overarching picture of the socioreligious makeup of the country. This includes a background of the Zaydi and Shafi’i sects of Islam which makes up the majority of the population. Then, an analysis of President Saleh’s tendency to coopt jihadist groups will show how he has facilitated the presence of militant Islamist groups within his borders. After describing the detrimental effects of Saleh’s cooptation,

¹²⁶ For a discussion on the false assumptions of weak states, see Edward Newman, “Weak States, State Failure and Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no.4 (Fall 2007): 463-488.

¹²⁷ The term “weak state” is defined here using the analysis of Barry Buzan; who asserts that a state’s weakness is proportional to its sociopolitical cohesion. Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era, Second Edition* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991), 97.

a description of the impact by Afghan Arabs and their Salafi Jihadist outlook will highlight the ideology which many of the coopted militant groups prescribe to; and more importantly, the ideology ascribed by AQAP.

The analysis will show that Yemen has not become a hotbed for extremist merely because it is a weak state with a Muslim population, but because the government has facilitated the presence of militant Islamists throughout its history. Furthermore, the analysis concludes that Saleh's reliance on coercive power to solve political disputes in the periphery has provided the southern tribal community two options: accept the status quo and continue to be marginalized, or partner with the Jihadists in order to alleviate the suffering. The U.S. must then adopt two key tenets in its strategy toward Yemen in order to provide the southern tribes with a more peaceful option: first, make a good faith effort to directly address the grievances; and second, avoid strengthening President Saleh's means to maintain the status quo through coercion.

A. A TRADITIONAL COEXISTENCE: ZAYDIS, SHAFI'IS, TRIBALISM AND THE STATE

Yemen has long been a traditionally conservative Muslim State; but first and foremost it has been a state where tribalism rather than Islamism was a source of conflict. The Zaydi Shi'as of the North and the Shafi'i Sunnis which make up the majority of the population have coexisted and even worshipped together for nearly 800 years. The Zaydi Imamate, which had controlled the North for centuries, built the foundations of an Islamic State, thus providing a tradition of Islamism within the country. The Zaydi Imamate represented a traditionally conservative Islamist state until the Revolution of 1962. Yet even after the Republicans took the reins of the nation, Zaydism was too intertwined within North Yemen's tribal society to become politically marginalized.

Shafi'i Sunnis, much like their Zaydi Shi'a counterparts, took a more philosophical interpretation of Islam rather than a literal view. But unlike the Zaydis, the Shafi'is relied less on hierarchal leadership, thus allowing the religion to spread quickly and easily throughout the remainder of Yemen. By the thirteenth century, the traditional Zaydi and Shafi'i populations had settled into the regions of the country which they

occupy today.¹²⁸ The philosophical rather than literal interpretation of the Quran by both of Yemen's traditional Islamic sects, along with their tolerance for other belief systems, has given Yemen a foundation of moderate and tolerant Islamic practices. Despite being a weak state, this foundation of tolerance provides a 'firebreak' for the spread of the extremist views inherent in militant Islamism.

1. Mutual Tolerance

The Zaydis have become ingrained in the northern highlands of Yemen providing an enduring and traditional form of moderate Islam in the North of the country. The origins of Zaydism in Yemen can be traced back to the 9th century AD when the northern tribes of Yemen requested a shi'ite from the Hijaz region to moderate a 300 year old dispute. Yahya bin al-Husain answered the invitation, and remained in the northern highlands to introduce Zaydi teachings to the tribes of the area.¹²⁹ Al-Husain created the first Zaydi state in 893, which asserted that the rightful leader of the Zaydis should be a descendent of the Prophet, and this imam should also be the leader of the state.¹³⁰ Maintaining a state in the midst of a fractionalized tribal area was no small feat. But since the religious tenets of the Imamate intrinsically respected the order and tradition of the tribes, the Zaydi Imamate was able to survive and flourish among the northern tribal system.¹³¹

The flexibility and tolerance of the Zaydi sect of Shi'ism has become a defining characteristic of northern Yemen. After being pushed out of its birthplace in northern Iran, Zaydism is now unique to Yemen and forms nearly forty-five percent of the population.¹³² The Zaydis differ from other forms of Shi'ism in both beliefs and interactions with outside groups. Also known as "Fivers" because of their interpretation

¹²⁸ D. Thomas Gochenour, "Towards a Sociology of the Islamisation of Yemen," in *Contemporary Yemen: Politics and Historical Background*, ed. B.R. Pridham (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 16.

¹²⁹ D. Thomas Gochenour, "Towards a Sociology of the Islamisation of Yemen," 8.

¹³⁰ Barak A. Salmoni and others, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*, 65.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report 2008," <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108496.htm> (accessed 20 October, 2010).

of the rightful succession of Imams from 'Ali, Zaydis have traditionally emphasized rationalism over literal interpretation of Islam. They have taken a more tolerant view of the Sunnis as well, which has allowed the Zaydis to coexist peacefully with the Sunni majority in Yemen since their arrival in the ninth century.¹³³

The Zaydi influence in the north was matched by an equally tolerant form of Sunni Islam in the South. While the Zaydis established a strong and lasting presence within the northern tribal areas, the majority of Yemen consists of Sunni Muslims from the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence.¹³⁴ The Shafi'i school was introduced in the southern highlands of Yemen in the eleventh century as an alternative to oppressive religious rule.¹³⁵ Its lack of hierarchical organization, or a 'divinely endowed aristocracy,' allowed Shafi'i to spread quickly throughout the rest of Yemen. Additionally, Shafi'ism gained state sponsorship from the Ayyubids who ruled lower Yemen in the 12th century, thus adding to its already growing influence throughout the country.¹³⁶ And like the Zaydis, the Shafi'is represented a more open interpretation of Islam, therefore making both religious groups tolerant of other beliefs and traditions. Their moderation and flexibility allowed the Zaydis and Shafi'is to coexist without any major sectarian conflict.

Imperial exploitation, followed by post-colonial nationalism characterized the modern development of the greater Middle East, yet Yemen has been able to maintain a great deal of isolation from European and Western influence. Therefore the common grievances which have brought about the Islamic revival of the late 20th century were not necessarily present in Yemen. The importance of Islam in everyday life was not denied by colonial powers or authoritarian regimes. Both Zaydis and Shafi'is were intertwined with society and state since the thirteenth century, forming a tradition of political Islamism which would weather both external and internal pressures which sought to divorce religion from governance.

¹³³ Barak Salmoni, and others, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*, 65.

¹³⁴ Shafi'i Sunnis make up 55% of the population, see U.S. Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report 2008*.

¹³⁵ D. Thomas Gochenour, "Towards a Sociology of the Islamisation of Yemen," 15.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

In essence, Yemen's unique socio-religious history has shaped how Islam and governance have evolved together into a pluralistic style of government which includes Islamists as well as socialists; tribal elites and Republicans. Political Islamism has become a featured aspect of the Yemeni government and represents the tolerant and moderate nature of the country's religious background. Islam has become an integral part of governance; helping to create a balance between the authoritarian nature of the ruling party, and the traditional background of the citizenry. The Islah party has been able to successfully integrate important aspects of the country's Islamic background into government institutions and law making. This is illustrated by the deliberate recognition of Islam as the sole source of the country's constitutional legitimacy.¹³⁷ But just as the president has allowed political Islamists to participate in government he has also given militants legitimacy as well. Therein lies the peril of trusting the Saleh regime with counterterrorism operations which have repercussions for U.S. national security.

B. COOPTING JIHADISM: MILITANT ISLAMISTS ON THE GOVERNMENT PAYROLL

The government of Yemen has not only tolerated the presence of Jihadists within its borders, but has also coopted them as a militia. This provides a conundrum for U.S. strategists since this particular practice has continued into the era of al Qaeda. One of the tenets of U.S. strategy in weak states, and in Yemen in particular, has been to allow the indigenous forces perform counterterrorism operations. But how vigorously will the Saleh regime pursue AQAP if they have a past history of cooperating with militants? The government's cooptation of militant Islamists in the not so distant past seriously challenges the assumptions within U.S. strategy toward Yemen. The background of President Saleh's partnership with Jihadists is an important variable to include in the planning and execution of U.S. policy to counter AQAP.

The Islamic revival, and especially the militant ideas espoused by Sayyid Qutb, took root and spread throughout the Middle East during the 1970s and especially in the 1980s. Yemen was not exempt from the revolutionary fervor, and militant Islamists in the region began to provide the ideology and motivation for Islamists in Yemen. Groups

¹³⁷ The Constitutions of the Republic of Yemen, Articles 1-5.

such as the Islamic Jihad Organization injected Yemen with an extremist strand of Islamism which would normally be considered a threat to authoritarian governments; the government of the Yemen Arab Republic viewed the groups as an opportunity however. The Marxist government of the PDRY was a natural enemy of both the northern government and the Jihadists, and during his term as Yemen's President, Ibrahim al-Hamdi welcomed Salafi jihadists to fight the communists in South Yemen. Once President Saleh took office in 1978 he continued to direct the militant Islamist fervor towards the PDRY.¹³⁸ While the militants were melded into the anti-Marxist guerrilla groups during the late 70s, many also went to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 80s.

Returning veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War known as the 'Afghan-Arabs,' added a new and dangerous dimension to the Jihadist movement in Yemen. The Salafi Jihadist movement espoused by Afghan veterans became both a blessing and a curse to the government of Yemen. Regardless, President Saleh was still able to coopt the Jihadist forces to once again fight the South during the 1994 civil war. The continued cooptation of the Jihadists in Yemen has facilitated their current ability to mobilize within the country.

The government of Yemen has a long history of coopting Jihadists to fight against their opponents in the South. During the 1960s, North and South Yemen were both transformed by revolution leading the two states down very different political and social paths. Even though both the Republican government in the North and the Marxist government in the South were natural targets for militant Islamists, the Republicans proved to be the lesser of two evils. The Marxist government of the PDRY was a natural antagonist for the North and a lightning rod for the Islamists; the Saleh regime had used this animosity to their advantage.

President Saleh has traditionally partnered with two separate Jihadist groups since he took office in 1978, setting a trend for the next two decades. The first was a militant

¹³⁸ For President al Hamdi's welcoming of the Salafis see Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 224, and for President Saleh's cooption of Jihadists see Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 143.

wing of the Muslim Brotherhood known as the Islamic Front. This organization was headed by Sheik ‘Abd al-Majid al Zindani, a charismatic radical who cooperated with the government of Yemen to fight leftist groups within the country. In particular the group was used to fight the National Democratic Front (NDF), which had continually launched guerrilla attacks from the South during the 1970s.¹³⁹ In addition to fighting the Marxists, Zindani also played a part in implementing so called ‘scientific institutions’ in North Yemen. These were schools which taught Islamic curricula, but were widely believed to be a front for militant training and staging areas for Mujahedeen traveling to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets.¹⁴⁰

These institutions are still present today. One of the most notorious, the Al Iman University, is thought to be the education and training center for foreign Jihadists including Umar Forouk Abdulmutallab, and John Walker Lindh.¹⁴¹ Although suspected of being a weapons storage facility in addition to a Jihadist university, President Saleh often looks the other way when it comes to enforcing the law. He also goes out of his way to praise Zindani in front of Yemeni crowds while chastising him in front of American officials. Even after being classified as a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist” by the U.S. Treasury, Zindani remains unmolested by Yemeni officials.¹⁴² Al Zindani and the Islamic Front are just one example of Saleh’s cooptation of militant Islamists which ultimately formed ties with al Qaeda.

The leader of the second group coopted by Saleh played a major part in the 1994 civil war, and has direct links to al Qaeda. Sheik Tariq al-Fadhli came from a prominent tribal family in the Southern province of Abyan, which was dispersed after the Marxist government took over after the revolution. As a young child, Al Fadhli went into exile in

¹³⁹ Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 70.

¹⁴⁰ Eric Watkins, “Islamism and Tribalism in Yemen,” in *Islamic Fundamentalism*, ed. Abdel Salam and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 219.

¹⁴¹ John Walker Lindh was an American captured in Afghanistan fighting alongside al Qaeda forces. Steven Erlanger, “At yemen College, Scholarship and Jihadist Ideas,” *The New York Times* (January 19, 2010).

¹⁴² U.S. Department of the Treasury, “United States Designates bin Laden Loyalist,” February 24, 2004, <http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/js1190.htm> (accessed September 2, 2010).

¹⁴² Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 175.

Saudi Arabia, and in 1985 departed for Afghanistan to fight with the Mujahedeen. While in Afghanistan he met and fought with bin Laden and then returned to Saudi Arabia and Yemen to start the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO), which was believed to be funded by al Qaeda.¹⁴³ This organization played a part in welcoming home scores of Afghan veterans to Yemen, and nurturing the Jihadist ideology they had picked up in Afghanistan. The Afghan-Arabs would play a major role in radicalizing the Islamist movement within Yemen, and their militant skills were put to use by the government as well.

Al Fadhli and the IJO were first coopted by the government during the 1994 civil war, where they acted as the militant wing of Islah, carrying out crippling attacks against the leadership of the YSP.¹⁴⁴ This partnership illustrates President Saleh's trend of coopting militant groups throughout his rule. This has led to a dilemma of sorts: the cooptation of the Jihadist groups has become a norm within the government, thus in most cases facilitating their existence within the borders of the country. Also, the ideological differences between the Salafi Jihadist groups and the Zaydist and Shafi'ist tribal populations have threatened the tribal support base for Saleh. The Houthi rebellion in the North has been the result of political, economic and social grievances, but the religious aspect of the revolt is clearly a challenge to Saleh's continued support and cooptation of Salafi elements in the North.

The Zaydi revival in the Sad'a governorate has been a direct response the increased cooptation of Salafi political and militant groups by President Saleh. The incursion of Salafist and Wahhabist ideology from Saudi Arabia has been an enduring grievance to the Zaydi's, but the regime's embrace of militant groups during the civil war, and the inclusion of Salafis in politics has become too much for the traditional Zaydi factions of Sad'a.¹⁴⁵ The Houthi family, which had played an active part in government as part of the Zaydi derived al-Haqq party, took a pivotal role in the Zaydi revival as both

¹⁴³ Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 175

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Barak A. Salmoni and others, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*, 96.

political and religious advocates. The revival's anti government fervor was directed, among other things, toward the increased influence of the Salafis in government.

While the Houthi rebellion has many causal factors, the most significant to this study is its anti-Salafi element. This is by no means a small matter considering the religious ideology of AQAP. An even more significant point from this uprising is that the forceful reaction by the Saleh regime would not have been possible without the U.S. security assistance which was provided for counterterrorism purposes. A Rand study of the Houthi rebellion acknowledges that government's decision to solve the dispute by force was due to its increased military capacity provided by the U.S; the report states, "As the scales of coercive power seemed to tip ever more in the [Government of Yemen's] favor, U.S. aid to Yemen may have convinced Saleh he could rearrange relations between the [Government of Yemen] and the periphery."¹⁴⁶ This underscores the dangers of building up Saleh's security apparatus prior to political reform. In this case, U.S. training and equipment which was meant to counter al Qaeda, went instead towards resolving political disputes with force. It also weakened a social group which was naturally opposed to AQAP's religious ideology, thus possibly providing space for Salafi encroachment.

1. Salafi Jihadism and the Afghan Arabs

The spread of the Salafi movement into Yemen has been both welcomed and abhorred. The government has historically welcomed the Salafi Jihadists who they have used to fight the Marxist South and later the YSP. But the Salafi beliefs and practices are not inherently compatible with the Zaydi, Shafi'i, or Sufi sects of Islam residing in Yemen. The Salafi movement is a puritanical approach to Islam where innovative interpretations of the Quran are forbidden. This is in contrast to the more flexible and tolerant outlook of the Zaydi and Shafi'i sects which dominate Yemen. While there is diversity within the Salafi community, including purists, politicians and Jihadists; the main belief is that there is "only one legitimate religious interpretation; Islamic pluralism does

¹⁴⁶ Barak A. Salmoni and others, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*. 126.

not exist.”¹⁴⁷The Afghan experience helped to infuse a more militant worldview, making Salafi-Jihadism the key characteristic of Afghan Arabs and AQAP.

While the purist and politico versions of Salafism are not necessarily violent, the Mujahedeen fighting in Afghanistan developed a Jihadist version. Salafi Jihadists populate the ranks of AQAP, and although they are able to coexist in the southern tribal areas, in the Zaydi dominated northern tribal territories they do not have the same freedom of movement. In a statement referencing the Houthi rebellion in the North, AQAP reveals how the Salafi worldview comes into conflict with a large portion of Yemeni society: “We ask God to allow the defeat of the [Shi’a] rejectionists by the army and vice versa so that the Sunnis prevail.”¹⁴⁸ The strict Salafi rejection of man-made laws and cultural traditions also sets them on a collision course with southern tribes as well, not just the Zaydi North.¹⁴⁹ Despite the differences, the Jihadists have managed to coexist with the population; but it remains to be seen if they can sustain their tolerance in the long run.

C. CONCLUSION

The nature of the Islamic community in Yemen does not inherently provide fertile ground for extremism, but the government’s traditional cooptation of militant groups has facilitated radical mobilization. The Zaydi and Shafi’i sects which make up the majority of the Yemeni population have coexisted for hundreds of years without major sectarian strife. But like much of the Middle East, the Islamic revival introduced a more militant fervor among some groups. The rise of militant Islam, and more specifically the return of the Afghan Arabs, was embraced by the government rather than condemned. President Saleh has used Jihadists groups in peacetime and in war to disrupt and attack his political enemies. He has taken advantage of their anti-communist fervor to fight the PDRY and later to go after members of the YSP during the civil war. Saleh’s cooptation of ardent

¹⁴⁷ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (April-May 2006): 207.

¹⁴⁸ From Sheik Ibrahim al-Rubaysh, in AQAP’s newsletter *Sada al-Malahim*, quoted in Alistair Harris, *Exploiting Grievances*, 7.

¹⁴⁹ Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 95.

Salafi Jihadists such as Zindani has been an alarming trend, and a point of contention for the U.S. The government's continued partnerships with Salafis has also been proven to be a point of contention, as well as a motivating cause for the Zaydi revival in the northern governorate of Sad'a. And while the Zaydi revival may seem as a natural firebreak against Salafi Jihadism, the government's overwhelming military response to the Houthi rebellion has alienated the Zaydi population rather than partnering with them to stem the rise AQAP.

President Saleh's response to the Houthi rebellion provides paramount and tangible feedback on the U.S. strategy toward Yemen. The military aid provided to the government of Yemen for counterterrorism operations has given President Saleh a coercive tool which he has used to solve internal disputes. While Saleh may perceive the Houthi family as a threat to his regime, in the end it is a political and social problem. By providing the Yemeni government the tools of coercion prior to implementing the reforms called for in the U.S. strategy, President Saleh now has the means and the will to solve his political disputes with force. This does not bode well for the southern population which has long standing political and social grievances with the Saleh regime. The coercive nature of the government does not provide for a peaceful political reconciliation with the South, therefore the population is more apt to be wooed by militant groups in order to challenge the government. AQAP has taken advantage of the antigovernment sentiment in order to form partnerships with the southern tribes. Ironically, the government's cooptation of militant groups has facilitated the rise of AQAP.

It is not surprising then to find that al Qaeda has been able to have a beachhead in Yemen. The following chapter will discuss the rise of AQAP, including the strategy the group has adopted to win over the southern population of Yemen.

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V. THE RISE OF AQAP: STRATEGIES, FAILURES AND SUCCESSES

The resurgence of AQAP has been an unwelcomed, yet not an unexpected development in Yemen. So far the U.S. government has looked to the usual suspects for this phenomenon, such as Yemen's status as a weak state; the corrupt government of President Saleh; 'ungoverned' tribal regions; internal rebellion; and chronic economic and humanitarian problems. While these conditions have obviously helped al Qaeda, they are not necessarily the reason AQAP has found traction. As illustrated in the previous chapter, militant Islamists have been a part of Yemen's sociopolitical landscape for nearly fifty years. The Saleh regime has tolerated and even coopted Jihadists in the recent past, therefore facilitating their ability to mobilize within the country. Yet since 9/11, President Saleh has cooperated with U.S. counterterrorism efforts. Although somewhat of a halfhearted effort, Saleh has learned from his mistake in 1990 of failing to side with the U.S. in its national security efforts. Al Qaeda has learned from its mistakes as well. The core leadership of al Qaeda has emphasized a Maoist strategy for its affiliate groups; a strategy especially emphasized after the group's failures in Iraq.¹⁵⁰ AQAP is especially suited for this type of strategy in Yemen. Their successes over the past two years illustrate how they have managed to adjust their strategy to navigate the turbulent sociopolitical landscape of Yemen. The group owes its success as much to its strategic communication as to the overreliance on 'hard power' by the Saleh regime and the United States.

The recent rise of AQAP is the result of a decade-long series of events which has shaped both international politics as well as sociopolitical conditions within Yemen. This chapter will provide a brief background of al Qaeda's linkages with Yemen over the past

¹⁵⁰ For al Qaeda's use of Maoist strategy see Mark E. Stout and others, *The Terrorist Perspectives Project: Strategic and Operational views of Al Qaida and Associated Movements* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 126-128.

twelve years.¹⁵¹ The various Jihadists groups in Yemen have coalesced over the years into one viable organization which has evolved and adjusted its strategies to effectively operate in that country. AQAP's ability to exploit the grievances of the southern population has taken a central role in their Yemen strategy. Going hand in hand with their populist approach to the people of Yemen, AQAP has mastered a strategic communications campaign which dwarfs any effort put out by the governments of Yemen or the U.S. Additionally, the relatively small group has also been able to gain support and recruits by goading the government and the U.S. into using military force within the southern tribal areas. But despite the effective strategies, AQAP is still vulnerable to collapse due to the fundamental differences between Salafi jihadist ideologies and traditional Yemeni tribalism. So far though, AQAP has found its success in the cooptation of Yemeni social structures, especially through the southern tribal networks.¹⁵² This spotlights the fact that the southern population has become the Center of Gravity for AQAP; therefore U.S. strategy toward Yemen should strive towards a similar goal.

A. IN THE BEGINNING: THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF AQAP

The official formation of AQAP did not occur until 2009, but al Qaeda affiliates in Yemen have been evolving for over a decade. A series of events spawned by Osama bin Laden's "Declaration of Jihad" against the U.S. in 1996 placed Yemen in the crosshairs as a 'frontline state' in the so called War on Terror. The attack on the U.S.S. Cole, the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the Saudi purge of al Qaeda cells from 2003 through 2008, all shaped the evolution of AQAP in Yemen. In addition to the external events taking place, the continued tolerance of Jihadist groups by President Saleh facilitated the continued progress of the group. There were many events

¹⁵¹ Although the Aden hotel bombing in 1992 has been linked to the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, their affiliation to al Qaeda at the time was tenuous. The most salient contact between Jihadists and al Qaeda was after the 1998 embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya; where communications linkages were detected and mapped by the FBI; see Victoria Clark, *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, 167.

¹⁵² The idea of al Qaeda's cooptation of tribes is expressed by many researchers; most notably Sarah Phillips, and most recently by Ryan Evans. Sarah Phillips, "What Comes Next in Yemen? Al Qaeda, the Tribes and State-Building," *Yemen: On the Brink* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2010), 4; Ryan Evans, "From Iraq to Yemen: Al-Qa'ida's Shifting Strategies," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 10 (October 2010): 11-15.

and policies which culminated in a viable al Qaeda affiliate operating out of Yemen. A brief review of the seminal events will illuminate how AQAP has been able to entrench itself within Yemen, despite the efforts of the U.S.

The predecessor to AQAP, known as al Qaeda in Yemen (AQIY), evolved out of various Salafi Jihadists groups which had been operating in Yemen for years. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Afghan Arabs added a volatile mix to the Jihadists groups which had already resided in Yemen prior to the Soviet-Afghan war. Through the early to mid 1990s these groups had been coopted by President Saleh to fight his Marxist and socialist enemies. But as the fighting dried up, a few groups had begun to align themselves with Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. The initial activity by the al Qaeda affiliated groups began in the late 1990s under the auspices of various elements, most notably the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army (AAIA). While they are thought to have been responsible for an attempted attack against U.S. forces transiting Aden in 1992, their best known for their involvement in the bombing of the USS Cole.¹⁵³

The attack on the USS Cole was a defining event for al Qaeda in Yemen, and it also revealed the facilitative nature of the Saleh regime. Four years prior to the attack on the Cole, Osama bin Laden officially called on all Muslims to attack the United States; this “Declaration of Jihad” was a uniting call to the Jihadists in Yemen.¹⁵⁴ The fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan, and the government sponsored fight against the southern socialists during the 1994 civil war, was now being replaced by a call to jihad against the U.S. Three years after bin Laden’s declaration, members of the AAIA were closely coordinating with the al Qaeda leader to attack U.S. warships coming into Aden. After a failed attempt in January of 2000 against the USS The Sullivans, a second try yielded success for the Jihadists. The first al Qaeda attack in Yemen was directly coordinated by Osama bin Laden himself, and placed Yemen in a new category for both the Jihadists and the U.S.

¹⁵³ The 9/11 Commission Report does not officially link al Qaeda to the 1992 attacks, or AAIA, but the leader of AAIA, Tariq al-Fadhli. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Against the United States, *9/11 Commission Report* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, July 22, 2004), 59.

¹⁵⁴ R. Kim Cragin, “Early History of Al-Qa’ida,” *The Historical Journal* 51, no. 4 (December 2008): 1047–1067.

By October 2000, Yemen was finally patching up its relations with the U.S., but the attack on the *Cole* revealed some alarming, yet enduring truths about President Saleh's relationship with Jihadist groups. The balking nature in Yemen's cooperation in the *Cole* investigation only highlighted the ties between President Saleh and the Salafi Jihadists within his country. The FBI investigation was stymied on many levels by President Saleh, who reluctantly shared information with U.S. officials about key suspects.¹⁵⁵ Additionally, the leader of the cell which plotted the *Cole* attack, Abdel Rahim al-Nashiri, was given official protection from arrest and was able to travel freely throughout Yemen, including Sana'a. In a subsequent trial it was made public that the Yemeni minister of security who oversaw anti-terrorism activities had given an order to allow al-Nashiri free passage, as well as cooperation for his operations in 2000.¹⁵⁶

The attack on the USS *Cole* was a major recruiting tool for al Qaeda and it became a call to arms for the Jihadists within Yemen. Nearly two years to the day in October 2002, an almost identical suicide attack on the French oil tanker *Limburg* highlighted the continued threat posed by the al Qaeda affiliates. But the terrorist attacks of 9/11 would prove nearly fatal to the Yemeni based militant groups in 2002 and 2003 as the U.S. went on the offensive. President Saleh's tolerance for the al Qaeda linked groups all but vanished after 9/11 as he feverishly attempted to distance himself from his coopted Jihadists, lest he suffer the same fate as the Taliban.

The more aggressive stance taken by the U.S. after September 11, 2001, resulted in the decapitation of the al Qaeda affiliate in Yemen. In late 2002, the leader of AQIY was killed in a U.S. drone strike, and in relatively quick succession the group's second in command was captured in 2003. The death of Abu ali al-Harithi and the capture of Muhammed Hamdi al Ahdal dealt a severe blow to the nascent AQIY.¹⁵⁷ While Jihadist groups still remained in Yemen, the years following the arrest of al Ahdal were devoid of

¹⁵⁵ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Against the United States, *9/11 Commission Report*, 190-192.

¹⁵⁶ Eric Watkins, "Yemen's Innovative Approach to the War on Terror," *Terrorism Monitor* 3, no. 4, (February 23, 2005) [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=27598](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=27598) (accessed 20 October 2010).

¹⁵⁷ STRATFOR Global Intelligence, "Yemen: Al Qaeda's Resurgence," April 22, 2008, http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/yemen_al_qaedas_resurgence (accessed 22 September 2010).

any major activities. There are several reasons why this lull was taking place. First, the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent insurgency attracted many Jihadists from Yemen to fight with militant groups in that country. A group known as the Yemen Soldiers Brigade is said to have sent 300 of its fighters to Iraq, which is a small representation of the over 4,000 Yemenis which had participated as foreign fighters in the Iraq War up to 2005.¹⁵⁸ Thus, it can be said that Jihadist activity in Yemen was bound to drop considerably after 2003. The decapitation of AQIY's hierarchy, in addition to the thousands of Jihadists flocking to Iraq, led to a false appraisal by the U.S. government however; while al Qaeda was momentarily silenced, it was not out of the picture for good.

B. THE RESURGENCE: LEADERSHIP AND EXPERIENCE IN AQAP

The resurgence of al Qaeda in Yemen can be attributed to at least three separate events. First, in February 2006, 23 members of al Qaeda escaped from a high security prison in Sana'a; allegedly with the help of Yemeni Security forces.¹⁵⁹ The escape proved to be a catalyst for the regeneration of AQIY leadership. Second, the successful Saudi counterterrorism sweep which began in 2003 effectively pushed al Qaeda's Saudi cell into Yemen. And finally, the Sunni awakening and the U.S. surge in Iraq had broken the back of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), sending a large contingent of fighters back to Yemen, providing both experience and numbers. The combination of experience, manpower, and a new core of leadership, has accounted for the strong resurgence of AQAP.

The 2006 jailbreak which gave Nasir al Wahayshi his freedom had also breathed fresh life into al Qaeda in Yemen. Al Wahayshi's background as Osama bin Laden's secretary, as well as his experience fighting with al Qaeda in Afghanistan, gave AQIY a new air of credibility. It is unknown if he had originally planned on coming back to Yemen to join fellow Jihadists, but his fate was chosen for him when he was captured in

¹⁵⁸ For statement on Yemen Soldiers Brigade see Jane Novak, "Arabian Peninsula al Qaeda groups merge," *The Long War Journal*, January 26, 2009, http://longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/01/arabian_peninsula_al.php (accessed 22 September, 2010); for number of Yemenis in Iraq see Anthony Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid, "Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom's Response," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (September 19, 2005), 5, http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/050919_saudimiltantsiraq.pdf (accessed October 2, 2010).

¹⁵⁹ Steven Erlanger, "Yemen's Chaos Aids the Evolution of a Qaeda Cell," *The New York Times* (3 January, 2010).

Iran and then extradited to Yemen. After his extradition in 2003, al Wahayshi spent the remainder of his jail time in Sana'a with fellow al Qaeda members. It is probable that while in captivity Wahayshi intermingled with Yemeni jihadists, and this facilitated his decision to stay in Yemen and start up a new group fashioned after bin Laden's model in Afghanistan.

The 2006 escape produced two capable leaders for al Qaeda, as Wahayshi was joined by his new military commander, Qassim al Raymi.¹⁶⁰ After their escape, al Qaeda activity in Yemen became more frequent and coordinated. Starting fresh in 2007, the new attacks seemed to go after the traditional al Qaeda target sets; western interests and Yemeni security forces. The well planned attacks, along with the addition of a highly effective propaganda wing, proved that AQIY possessed the aptitude and organization of its northern counterpart in Saudi Arabia which had been embroiled in a violent insurgency campaign since 2003. The Saudis' successful campaign against al Qaeda pushed a good portion of the Jihadists, including leadership figures, south into Yemen. Thus, the successful counterterrorism campaign executed by the Saudis, along with the failures of the Yemeni security system led to the unplanned merger of the two al Qaeda affiliates.

The defeat of the al Qaeda insurgency in Saudi Arabia led to an exodus of Jihadists into Yemen, providing both manpower and leadership to the newly merged AQAP. The Saudis' secretive counterterrorism campaign began in 2003 after a robust and highly organized network of al Qaeda sleeper cells was called into action by Osama bin Laden in order to open a "third front" in the Kingdom.¹⁶¹ By 2008 the insurgency was seemingly crushed by the Saudis, who not only used violence to defeat the al Qaeda cells, but also 'soft power' by way of rehabilitation centers. One of the recipients of the de-radicalization program was Said Ali al-Shihri, who had been released to the Saudi government by the U.S., where he was detained at Guantanamo Bay after being captured in Afghanistan. Al-Shihri disappeared after his release and reemerged in Yemen to

¹⁶⁰ Steven Erlanger, "Yemen's Chaos Aids the Evolution of a Qaeda Cell," *The New York Times* (3 January, 2010).

¹⁶¹ Bruce Reidel and Bilal Y. Saab, "Al Qaeda's Third Front: Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 35.

become the deputy to al Wahayshi.¹⁶² Following al Shihri were the numerous ‘foot soldiers’ of the Saudi insurgency. There were a number of Yemenis who were a part of the Saudi network who no doubt returned to their homeland to resurface in the newly merged AQAP.¹⁶³ While AQIY had successfully initiated a new round of attacks within Yemen, the infusion of the Saudi leadership and manpower played an integral part into the formation and effectiveness of AQAP. In addition to the surge from Saudi Arabia, the hardened veterans of Iraq were returning to Yemen to take up arms with AQAP, thus adding to the Saudi numbers and experience.

The returning veterans of the Iraq War have added an invaluable dimension to AQAP; experience. The presence of the Iraq veterans in AQAP is comparable to that of the Afghan-Arabs returning from the Soviet-Afghan War two decades earlier. During the 1990s the Afghan-Arabs played a significant role in militant Islamist movements throughout the Middle East, North Africa and even the Balkans; lending their expertise in guerrilla warfare to various insurgencies and civil wars throughout the region.¹⁶⁴ This was the case in Yemen as well, where Saleh continually coopted the veteran Jihadists to fight his political enemies. Iraq has produced the same type of experience and fervor, producing a second generation of veterans. And the numbers returning from Iraq are significant; one estimate puts the number at 2,000 Yemeni veterans returning to fill AQAP’s ranks.¹⁶⁵ It has been widely noted that the return of Iraq veterans has added to the *quality* of AQAP as well; while experience as an insurgent is helpful, the ‘lessons learned’ from AQI experience has been just as fruitful, if not more so.¹⁶⁶ The mistakes made by AQI leadership have been incorporated into AQAP’s strategy in Yemen, providing for a more tribal-centric approach when dealing with the population; and a shift in targeting from high profile attacks to a continuous flow of small scale operations. This

¹⁶² Steven Erlanger, “Yemen’s Chaos Aids the Evolution of a Qaeda Cell.”

¹⁶³ Bruce Reidel and Bilal Y. Saab, “Al Qaeda’s Third Front: Saudi Arabia,” 42.

¹⁶⁴ The idea of Iraq as the new ‘Afghanistan,’ or the new training ground for Jihadists is a prolific viewpoint and is examined more in depth by Thomas Hedgehammer, “Global Jihadism after the Iraq War,” *Middle East Journal* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 13.

¹⁶⁵ Estimate from Magnus Ranstorp, a terrorism expert from the Swedish National Defense College, quoted in Steven Erlanger, “Yemen’s Chaos Aids the Evolution of a Qaeda Cell.”

¹⁶⁶ For the discussion on returning Iraq veterans see Jeremy M. Sharp, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations*, 11; and Ryan Evans, “From Iraq to Yemen: Al-Qa’ida’s Shifting Strategies.”

new strategy will be discussed in more detail below. It is clear to see that the lessons learned from Iraq, and the addition of thousands of experienced veterans, has significantly impacted the resurgence of AQAP in Yemen.

The resurgence of AQAP is not the result of one event, or the actions of one leader, but the combination of three specific events. The 2006 jailbreak in Sana'a allowed several key al Qaeda leaders escape and emerge as the new leadership of AQIY. The newly energized group was able to plan and execute many well organized attacks targeting western interests and the government's security apparatus. While AQIY was gaining traction in Yemen, the Saudi affiliate of al Qaeda was reeling from the government's intense counter terrorism operation. The exodus of the Saudi militants ultimately bolstered the ranks of AQIY, and merging into AQAP in January of 2009. Thus the leadership of AQAP was comprised of two men, both with ties to al Qaeda's core leadership in Pakistan, and both with extensive experience in Afghanistan. The group's expertise and experience level was enhanced by the return of thousands of Iraq veterans. The addition of manpower, and a strategy infused with the lessons learned from Iraq, led to a violent and effective resurgence of AQAP.

C. AQAP IN ACTION: A TRIBAL-CENTRIC STRATEGY

It is clear by the words and deeds of AQAP that the tribal society of Yemen has become the center of gravity in their strategy. The indigenous nature of AQAP's leadership, as well as lessons learned from Iraq have provided AQAP with a more tribal-centric strategy, which focuses on identifying with the population's grievances rather than forcing an ideology at gunpoint.¹⁶⁷ To this end, the strategic communications campaign has been an integral part of al Qaeda's operations in Yemen. AQAP has been able to effectively frame its message through a quarterly publication which serves to highlight grievances and present solutions. Through their messages and actions, AQAP has been able to execute a strategy which aims to drive a wedge between the government and the tribes; especially in the South. The strategy has found success and can be attributed to lessons learned from the failures of AQI in the Iraq War, as well as the

¹⁶⁷ Ryan Evans provides a discussion on how 'lessons learned' from Iraq may have come to shape AQAP's strategy. See Ryan Evans, "From Iraq to Yemen."

successes in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Yet the indigenous nature of AQAP has also facilitated the strategy since many within the leadership, as well as the ‘foot soldiers’ have natural ties to the tribal networks within Yemen. There is no question that al Qaeda is an evolving organization which is willing and able to learn from its past experiences. AQAP has learned from the best and worst practices of other affiliates in order to find its niche in Yemen.

The strategy of AQAP is reflective of the ideas espoused by al Qaeda’s second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al Qaeda has adopted a Maoist approach in that they see the Muslim community (*Ummah*) as the center of gravity.¹⁶⁸ Al-Zawahiri has made it clear on several occasions that their efforts, whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Yemen, should work within the context of the social norms of the given society. In other words; to live by the rules of whichever society they are attempting to win over. Al-Zawahiri’s correspondence to AQI leader Abu Musab Zarqawi during the Iraq War effectively conveys the intent of al Qaeda’s core leadership: “We will see that the strongest weapon which the mujahedeen enjoy—after the help and granting of success by God—is popular support from the Muslim masses...So we must maintain this support as best we can, and we should strive to increase it, on the condition that striving for that support does not lead to any concession in the laws of Sharia.”¹⁶⁹

Zawahiri’s message has been absorbed in Yemen as AQAP strives to work within the tribal networks of the South in order to gain the support of the ‘Muslim masses.’ Whether this strategy is born out of the lessons learned from Iraq, or from the cultural homogeneity between the AQAP cadre and the tribal society is up for debate; but a combination of the two propositions seems the most likely answer.

There is credible evidence which points to the indigenous nature of AQAP. First and foremost is the fact that al-Wahayshi is native to Yemen. Having leadership with an understanding of Yemen’s cultural norms and social landscape lends itself to a more tribal-centric approach. In addition to the leadership, there are an estimated 2,000

¹⁶⁸ Mark E. Stout and others, *The Terrorist Perspectives Project*, 126-128.

¹⁶⁹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi*, July 9, 2005, http://www.cfr.org/publication/9862/letter_from_ayman_alzawahiri_to_abu_musab_alzarqawi.html (accessed 2 October, 2010).

Yemeni jihadists returning from Iraq which can potentially provide a strong core of local fighters. There is no way to tell how many returning Iraq veterans will take up arms with al Qaeda, but given the sociopolitical and economic conditions in Yemen, chances are that many of these Jihadists will resume their struggle. Additionally, the returning veterans of the Iraq insurgency would surely bring back the lessons they learned and apply them to Yemen.

Al Qaeda's experience in Iraq was enough to prove how important it is to gain the support of the population. The experience also demonstrated how effective a steady campaign of violence can be against an occupying force. If AQAP has proven anything, it is that the organization has learned from the successes and failures of other al Qaeda affiliates; AQI in particular. The lessons learned in Iraq may not be the primary source of AQAP's populist approach, but there are clear signs that the missteps by Zarqawi have echoed across the Arabian Peninsula into Yemen.

Recent analysis has revealed the close link between lessons learned Iraq and the current operations of AQAP in Yemen. The actions of AQI under the leadership of Zarqawi are a clear example of a failed strategy which placed ideology ahead of gaining support from the population. As Ryan Evans points out, "maintaining the good will and support of the tribes was not a chief concern (for AQI)."¹⁷⁰ The result was a strong-armed approach, including forced marriages, brutal killings, and the marginalization of the tribal hierarchy.¹⁷¹ As mentioned above, these types of tactics drew harsh rebuffs from Zawahiri. The anti-tribal approach by the AQI leadership ended badly for al Qaeda when the tribes revolted in what is now known as the 'Sunni Awakening.' Evans asserts that AQAP's actions in Yemen are a result of lessons learned from Iraq; in particular "AQAP seeks to co-opt existing social and political structures and genuinely adopt the grievances and interests of Yemenis, particularly those in the tribal regions of the country."¹⁷²

The tribal-centric approach has also been supported by a deliberate shift in targeting methods as well. Instead of high profile attacks which result in heavy civilian

¹⁷⁰ Ryan Evans, "From Iraq to Yemen," 12.

¹⁷¹ David Kilcullen, "Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt," Small Wars Journal, entry posted August 29, 2007, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/08/anatomy-of-a-tribal-revolt> (accessed November 3, 2010).

¹⁷² Ryan Evans, "From Iraq to Yemen," 13.

casualties, AQAP has consistently targeted foreign interests and the government's security apparatus.¹⁷³ This is in contrast to the high profile attacks in Iraq which tended to kill scores of civilians. The hallmark targets of ideology-centric groups such as the Taliban or AQI, are absent in Yemen: attacks on schools, marketplaces and mosques which are meant to stir up sectarian violence, or rebuke 'un-Islamic' activities, only serve to alienate the population. It appears that AQAP has applied this lesson to its operations. It is clear that Wahayshi is in agreement with Zawahiri in his approach toward gaining popular support. The tribal networks of southern Yemen have clearly become AQAP's center of gravity during their resurgence over the past three years.

1. AQAP's Strategic Communication Campaign

What makes AQAP's resurgence even more effective is their control over the narrative. Strategic communications has always been the strong suit of al Qaeda, and they consider it an essential element of their strategy. This is illustrated by an early exchange between Osama bin Laden and the Taliban commander Mullah Omar: bin Laden emphasizes that "the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods (of winning over the *ummah*), in fact, its ratio may reach 90 percent of the total preparation for the battles."¹⁷⁴ AQAP is dominating the 'media war' in Yemen by disseminating their message through the written word as well as through 'propaganda of the deed.'

One of the most significant developments with AQIY, and later AQAP, was the release of the group's quarterly publication called *Sada al Malahim*, translated to read *The Echo of Battles*. This serves as al Qaeda's model of strategic communication, and has defined the nature of the struggle within Yemen. As Alistair Harris notes, *Sada al Malahim* provides a 'framework of collective action,' giving "a diagnosis of the problems faced by Yemenis, detailing grievances and apportioning blame. It also provides a prognosis for the future, proposing remedies and redress."¹⁷⁵ *Sada al Malahim* appeals to

¹⁷³ Christopher Boucek, "The Evolving Terrorist Threat in Yemen," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 9 (September 2010): 6.

¹⁷⁴ An excerpt from the Harmony document folder AFGP-2002-600321, *Letter from Usama bin Laden to Mullah Omar*, quoted in Mark E. Stout, et al, *The Terrorist Perspectives Project*, 168.

¹⁷⁵ Alistair Harris, *Exploiting Grievances*, 5.

the population of Yemen, especially the tribal networks and rural communities of the South. Through their magazine AQAP has identified with the grievances of the local populations and thus made their collective struggles one in the same. This is highlighted by an article in the March 2009 edition of *Sada al Malahim* which claims:

The people of Yemen are suffering from the decline of their living standards, the rise of prices, and the discriminatory practices with which the government deals with them in employment, the distribution of wealth and its looting, the misappropriation of lands, and the absence of someone to defend their rights.

Further into the March edition of the journal, Wahayshi attempts to paint the southern tribes as the target of government oppression, stating that military operations in the southern provinces of Shabwa, Abyan and Hadramawt were “a step to strike the tribes.”¹⁷⁶

In addition to framing grievances, AQAP uses its media to announce their intent to attack government and western targets.¹⁷⁷ Their ability to carry out the attacks displays a high level of planning and coordination. The group’s ability to announce these attacks and then carry them out has provided AQAP with a double-shot of credibility among its sympathizers. It is unclear if the media efforts by AQAP are gaining recruits from among the population; as the poorest country in the Middle East, and with the second lowest literacy rate in the Arab world, the effectiveness of an online magazine seems questionable at best. What seems more likely is their ability to exploit government and foreign military operations which target the already oppressed southern populations. Occurrences such as missile strikes or government raids are tangible events that have traction within the tribal community. In a culture where the value of justice is placed above all else, and vengeance is a tribal norm; the negative ramifications of an air raid, or a violent ‘counterterrorism’ operation, tends to strike a sour chord among the general population. The dichotomy of being the region’s poorest nation, yet outfitted with 21st-century military might, has gone a long way towards radicalizing the masses.

¹⁷⁶ Both passages from *Sada al Malahim* are quoted Alistair Harris, *Exploiting Grievances*, 6.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

D. THE FAILURES OF HARD POWER

“We all want revenge.” The blowback from an overreliance on ‘hard power’ is illustrated by this short but powerful statement made by Muhkbil Muhammad Ali, a tribal leader in the Abyan province, where 23 people including civilians were killed after an airstrike on 17 December, 2009.¹⁷⁸ The strike only made the tribes sympathize with al Qaeda while fermenting animosity towards the government of Yemen and the United States. AQAP did not need a newsletter or video statement to sway the tribes within Abyan province, the tangible memory of the air strikes accomplished the same task.

U.S. missile strikes and Yemeni military offensives have become fodder for the fire in AQAP’s attempts to win over the population. Just as they have striven to avoid civilian casualties, AQAP strives to exploit the collateral damage caused by the U.S. or President Saleh’s ‘counterterrorism’ sweeps. Missile strikes by the U.S. in March and December 2009 have been used to frame the U.S. as heartless invaders; while poorly executed military operations by the Saleh regime are framed to show the incompetence and futility of Yemen’s security apparatus. The so called ‘Battle of Marib’ is an example of this phenomenon.

On 30 July 2009, Yemeni security forces moved against a suspected al Qaeda safe haven in the governate of Marib. The operation fell apart at the seams when a ‘counterterrorism unit’ mistakenly shelled a tribal house rather than the suspected al Qaeda safe house, resulting in a running gun battle between tribal members and the Yemeni military.¹⁷⁹ Ultimately, the army withdrew leaving behind several dead, and seven captured soldiers. Not only did the al Qaeda cell remain intact and emboldened, but AQAP was able to score a coup in their strategic communications campaign with a short length documentary. In the video the narrator states, “A lot of excuses were given for this military operation [in Marib] but its main aim was to break the prestige of the tribes and to disarm them.”¹⁸⁰ This type of narrative is not uncommon after every military

¹⁷⁸ Sudarsan Raghavan, “From a decade’s missteps, a new threat emerges; Errors by U.S., Yemen help al-Qaeda regroup in poor Mideast nation,” *The Washington Post*, January 3, 2010.

¹⁷⁹ Gregory D. Johnsen, “The Expansion Strategy of Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula,” *CTC Sentinel* 2, no. 9 (September 2009): 8.

¹⁸⁰ Video narrative quoted in Sarah Phillips, “What Comes Next in Yemen?” 4.

operation, even those which are mounted against southern secessionists. In even more colorful language, Wahayshi used the same narrative after the government's crackdown on protests in the South.

This military movement mobilizing in Marib, Jawf, Shabwah, Abyan, Sana'a, and Hadramaut and which had been obscured in the media, is a step to strike the tribes with malicious excuses and shatter their pride, disarm them and control their lands, kill their sons, and make it easier for the bastard agents and the crusaders to humiliate them.¹⁸¹

AQAP's narratives frame military action as a threat to tribal pride, autonomy, and an attempt to disarm the population. It also portrays the Yemeni military and government as the "shield and belt" of the U.S.; doing the bidding of the U.S. while the people of Yemen take the brunt of the damage.¹⁸² While words may not be enough for AQAP to win favor with the tribes, poorly executed military operations, as well as U.S. missile attacks which cause heavy collateral damage, have proven to be a more tangible tool to sway the population's opinion.

The government's recent use of force in Shabwa and Abyan provinces has only aggravated the grievances of the southern population. In September and October of 2010 Yemeni security forces conducted raids on to town of Hawta in Shabwa province, and Moudia in Abyan, respectively. While the government claims to be conducting attacks against AQAP, their true motivations are suspect by the population. Many see the government's action as a move against the Southern Movement, especially in Abyan.¹⁸³ Although the government has more than enough justification for the security sweeps, the use of aircraft, tanks and artillery against villages has only added to the anger harbored against the government. The ramifications of this type of 'hard power' are described by

¹⁸¹ From the March, 2008 issue of Sada al Malahim, quoted in Alistair Harris, *Exploiting Grievances*, 6.

¹⁸² Statement from Qassem al Raymi in *The Battle of Marib*.
http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xbzdmp_battle-of-marib-august-1430-english_travel (accessed 20 October, 2010.)

¹⁸³ Robert F. Worth, "Yemen Military Besieges Town it Says is a Hide-Out for Dozens of Qaeda Militants," *The New York Times* (22 September, 2010); Laura Kasinof, "Local war in southern yemen pits government against militants," *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 18, 2010,
<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2010/1018/Local-war-in-southern-Yemen-pits-government-against-militants> (accessed November 10, 2010).

Professor Fouad Selahy from Sana'a University, "When the government attacks any governorate, the young people will retaliate and use weapons against the government...The planes are striking their regions, the planes are destroying their homes and farms. These people are not necessarily Al Qaeda."¹⁸⁴

Yemen's counterterrorism efforts have been a catalyst for 'breeding' AQAP recruits and sympathizers in the South. The demographics and political realities which make Yemen a weak state cannot fully be to blame for the rise of AQAP; the over reliance on 'hard power' by both the government of Yemen and the U.S. has given al Wahayshi the perfect tool for recruitment. Instead of selective targeting, the Yemeni counterterrorism efforts have been perceived by the population as being indiscriminant, thus mobilizing Jihadism in the lowlands and southern provinces.

E. CONCLUSION

The characteristics which make Yemen a weak state have provided the backdrop, but not the causal factors behind the rise of AQAP. Many assume that Jihadists groups such as al Qaeda use Yemen as a safe haven due to its 'ungoverned spaces,' skirting in below the government's radar. But the State is not as ignorant or as helpless as it seems. The evolution of AQAP has been facilitated by the government at times, including the cooptation of Jihadists within the State's security apparatus. AQAP's resurgence over the past few years can be attributed to three external factors as well; the Iraq War, the 2006 jailbreak in Sana'a, and the Saudis' counterinsurgency efforts which aggressively pushed al Qaeda into exile. These three events provided AQAP with the leadership, manpower, and experience it needed to form a cohesive group with an organized plan of action. Their tribal-centric strategy has gained traction within Yemen as well. The lessons learned from Iraq, as well as the indigenous nature of the group's leadership, has led AQAP down a more populist path which seeks to adopt the grievances of the tribal communities rather than assert a radical ideology. The comprehensive and coordinated strategic communications campaign has signaled the sophisticated nature of AQAP planning and execution. Yet recruits are not flocking to AQAP due to its campaign to

¹⁸⁴Ibid.

win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the *umma*, rather it has been the unwise use of ‘hard power’ by the government of Yemen and the U.S. which has the southern tribes partnering with al Qaeda.

The U.S. thus has a dilemma in Yemen: while AQAP has proven to be a threat to national security, attempts to eliminate the group have only swelled its ranks, or at least provided it with sympathizers. It is naïve to think that transnational jihadists such as AQAP will cease their attacks on the U.S. homeland if the United States drops its weapons and picks up a hammer to build schools, hospitals, and a better government. But it has been clear that U.S. missile strikes, and Yemeni military action which have caused widespread collateral damage, only plays into the hands of AQAP. In other words, al Qaeda and its affiliates are playing chess, while the U.S. is intent on playing a game of checkers. This is illustrated by the clever use of strategic communication by AQAP, and the complete lack thereof by the U.S. In discussing this strategic weakness, Mari Eder opines, “In the realm of ideas, the United States has failed to make use of what is potentially one of its most powerful weapons in the war against terrorism.”¹⁸⁵ An effective strategic communications campaign also includes action, and military force should not be a taboo. But ‘selective targeting’ and ‘Special Operations’ should be the watch-words. Above all else, by addressing grievances in the South, AQAP’s tribal-centric strategy will be marginalized, and replaced by a parallel effort from the government of Yemen and the United States. In a strange turn of events, the populist elements within AQAP’s strategy should be mirrored by the U.S. and Yemen.

Yemen will remain a weak state for some time, but that does not mean it has to be a “breeding ground for terrorists.” Smart policy changes can abruptly halt the rise of AQAP, and facilitate its fall.

¹⁸⁵ Mari K. Eder, “The Missing Element: Strategic Communication,” *United States Naval Institute: Proceeding* 135, no. 2 (February 2009): 28-31.

VI. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of Yemen's sociopolitical landscape has shown that the U.S. strategy toward Yemen has been based on idealistic assumptions which do not necessarily match the true characteristics and conditions present within the country. The U.S. policy toward weak states has been a resolute and enduring tenet of national security strategy for nearly a decade. Yet the strategy's aim to deny al Qaeda the use of safe havens has hit some major hurdles when applied to Yemen.

The formation of AQAP in January 2009 prompted U.S. President Barack Obama to reevaluate and reinvent U.S. strategy toward Yemen. The result was a "two pronged strategy" devised by the National Security Council which focused on building Yemen's capacity for good governance and effective security. The new strategy was born from the "weak state strategy" which has been inherent in U.S. policy since the events of September 11, 2001, when it was clear that al Qaeda's use of 'under-governed' territory in weak or failing states had become a major threat to U.S. national security. The tenets of this strategy reside in several policy documents, with the 2010 NSS being the most recent and authoritative. The objective of the weak state strategy has been to strengthen 'at risk' states in order to decrease the amount of 'ungoverned spaces.' The characteristics of this approach include, "information-sharing, law enforcement cooperation, and establishing new practices to counter evolving adversaries." It also states that the strategy is meant "to help states avoid becoming terrorist safe havens by helping them build their capacity for responsible governance and security through development and security sector assistance."¹⁸⁶ All of these characteristics are based on the assumption that the governments of weak states were able and willing to cooperate.

The "two pronged strategy" toward Yemen is the first attempt at applying the weak state strategy to counter a tangible threat from al Qaeda in a country where the U.S. does not have a major presence. The State building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq benefit from hundreds of thousands of troops and billions of dollars in developmental aid. The task in Yemen is just as immense, yet has only been allocated a miniscule amount of

¹⁸⁶ The White House, *2010 National Security Strategy*, 21.

funding and manpower. The assumptions present within the two pronged strategy do not match the conditions in Yemen and therefore pose a major problem to the U.S. strategy to counter AQAP.

The strategy crafted by the NSC to counter AQAP is comprised of two elements: First, to “strengthen the Government of Yemen’s ability to promote security and minimize the threat from violent extremists within its borders. And second, to “mitigate Yemen’s economic crisis and deficiencies in government capacity, provision of services, transparency, and adherence to the rule of law.” The strategy also notes that “as Yemen’s security challenges and its social, political, and economic challenges are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, so U.S. policy must be holistic and flexible in order to be effective both in the short and long term.”¹⁸⁷ Considering the resources available, and the sociopolitical landscape of Yemen, this “two pronged strategy” is overly idealistic and based on incorrect assumptions. First and foremost it assumes that the government of Yemen, led by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, shares the same security concerns as the U.S.; and more fundamentally, it assumes that President Saleh is willing to transform his government to be transparent and responsive to the entire population. As this study has shown, these assumptions do not hold true in Yemen.

The analysis of Yemen’s contemporary history and its sociopolitical conditions has proven that the assumptions resident in the U.S. strategy toward Yemen need to be revised. This study presents two overarching propositions which should guide U.S. strategy toward Yemen. First, *building Yemen’s security capacity prior to achieving political reform only gives President Saleh the ability to widen the rifts in the South, thus giving AQAP the ability to capitalize on their grievance-based approach.* The surge of U.S. security assistance to Yemen has strengthened the military arm of President Saleh’s authoritarian government, thus providing him with the ability to solve political problems with force rather than through diplomacy or reform.

The second proposition asserts *the tribal areas and the population of southern Yemen are the center of gravity in the struggle against AQAP.* Therefore, U.S. strategy should focus on a grassroots approach to building capacity. This does not mean

¹⁸⁷ House Committee, *Yemen on the Brink*, 10.

forsaking the central government of Yemen, rather making the resolution of southern grievances the primary focus of the effort. This includes partnering with leaders of the Southern Movement and the tribal elite in the disputed areas in order to move toward political reconciliation. The tribal communities in the South have become the Center of Gravity for AQAP; therefore the U.S. should direct its attention towards gaining tribal support and participation in local government. Tribal partnerships are the foundation of good governance in Yemen.

These propositions are based on the analyses of four aspects of Yemen's sociopolitical landscape. First, the historical analysis of Yemen's formative periods has shown the enduring nature of the country's divisions; second the examination of its governmental structure and institutions, both formal and informal, has revealed how President Saleh has used democracy as a façade, and how his vast patronage system and family-centric military complex can benefit from foreign aid and U.S. security assistance; third, the investigation of the country's socioreligious structure has highlighted the improbability of the country becoming an "incubator" for extremism; and finally the analysis of AQAP's history and strategy in Yemen has uncovered the motivations, strengths and weaknesses of the group which is the true target of U.S. strategy.

A. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

The review of Yemen's history reveals that three formative periods have come to define the sociopolitical landscape in the country, especially its North-South divide. The period of Imperialism from 1871–1918, reveals the origins of the political powerbase in the North, and the integrated nature of tribal society within state governance. This period also uncovers the manipulation of the southern tribes by the British during their rule in Aden. Underlying this whole timeframe were the spheres of influence between the Ottoman and British empires which produced a tangible border between North and South. The revolutionary period from 1962–1970 further divided the two Yemens as the North followed Nasser into the realm of Arab Nationalism while the South transformed into a Marxist state following the British departure from Aden.

The unexpected unification of the two Yemens in 1990 began the last, but most influential era in Yemen's history. The union of political and economic convenience set

the wheels of democracy in motion but ended in an authoritarian state as President Saleh and the northern dominated government failed to reconcile with the southern leadership. The civil war and its repercussions were the culmination of these three formative, yet divisive periods in Yemen's history. They illustrate the vulnerability of the southern population to a more powerful northern government, and show that President Saleh is prone to use force to solve his political dilemmas.

B. POLITICAL ANALYSIS

The examination of President Saleh's government after the civil war provides three main points. First, the democratic institutions created after unification have become a veneer of pluralistic governance in Yemen. After the civil war President Saleh effectively marginalized the YSP by first creating the Islah party, and then amending the constitution after the civil war to consolidate power within the executive branch. The second point revealed by the examination of Yemen's government is that President Saleh has formed a shadow government comprised of a vast patronage system which is meant to coerce, coopt, and fragment the various political, religious and social groups which threaten his rule. And finally, President Saleh has consolidated his power by staffing the most powerful elements of the military complex with his own family members and tribesmen. The nature of Yemen's government makes it clear to see that President Saleh does not benefit from initiating broad based reforms to increase transparency and responsiveness in his administration. This then challenges the idealistic assumptions within U.S. weak state strategy, and the "two pronged strategy" in particular.

C. SOCIORELIGIOUS ANALYSIS

Further assumptions within the strategy assume that weak states are 'breeding grounds' for extremism. The analysis of Yemen's socioreligious background and ideological leanings has exposed two key findings: first, the Zaydi and Shafi'i ideologies adhered to by the majority of the population are characterized by tolerance and flexibility and are therefore anathema to the Salafi ideology espoused by AQAP. Second, it has been the cooptation of militant Islamists by President Saleh which has facilitated the spread of extremism within the borders of Yemen. This goes against the assumption in

U.S. strategy which asserts that the lack of control by the government allows extremism to thrive; while in this case the government has coopted extremism, thus facilitating its presence. President Saleh's historical cooptation of militants to fight internal political battles has only recently come to an end with the rise of AQAP, but his use of jihadists in the recent past has certainly facilitated that group's existence.

D. STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF AQAP

Finally, the analysis of AQAP has revealed that the group has effectively made the southern population the Center of Gravity within its populist strategy. Instead of basing their actions and alliances on ideology alone, the group has focused on accommodating tribal norms and exploiting the rift between the southern population and the northern government. Their strategy has been formulated from lessons learned in Iraq, but it is also a product of the indigenous nature of the group's leadership. AQAP's ranks are also filled with veterans from Iraq which provide the group with a foundation of experience exceeding that of the Afghan Arabs from the previous generation. In addition to their constant flow of attacks, a prolific strategic communication campaign has been at the heart of AQAP's strategy; the overreliance on 'hard power' by the U.S. and the Yemeni government has only added to the campaign's effectiveness. The unwieldy actions by President Saleh's newly bolstered counterterrorism force, as well as U.S. missile strikes in the southern governorates, have only added to the grievances which AQAP expertly exploits.

The analysis of Yemen's sociopolitical landscape has shown that the current U.S. strategy to counter AQAP is based on overly broad and idealistic assumptions. A strategy which adheres to the propositions offered by this study will result in a more targeted approach which would focus on resolving grievances in the South, and place the counterterrorism efforts under U.S. control.

E. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has shown that U.S. strategy toward Yemen should impart two underlying assumptions. First, it should assume that building up President Saleh's security apparatus prior to accomplishing political reform will only further entrench the

authoritarian regime, thus providing AQAP more traction with its populist approach. Second, the strategy should presume that the Center of Gravity in the fight against AQAP is the population of the South. With these assumptions in mind, strategy toward Yemen should be defined by short term and long term objectives. Obviously the immediate threat to the United States should be addressed first.

1. Recommendations for the Short Term

In order to counter the immediate threat posed by AQAP, the U.S. should employ Special Operations Forces (USSOF) instead of Yemeni forces in order to effectively and efficiently disrupt AQAP leadership. Instead of training and equipping the security apparatus of the authoritarian state, the U.S. should use the resources, experience and expertise of seasoned USSOF units. U.S.-led Special Operations raids would eliminate the collateral damage inherent in airstrikes, or the large scale military operations from Saleh's security forces. The repercussions of U.S. missile strikes in Abyan, and the Yemeni military offensives in Marib and the southern governorates, have led to a backlash from the tribal population. Special operations provide a targeted approach to countering AQAP rather than the perceived indiscriminate targeting of conventional operations. They would also be a justified use of force against a terrorist organization which has already attacked the U.S. homeland.

The special operations option would require an added military commitment from the U.S., and the acceptance of more risk by the administration. A robust intelligence infrastructure would need to be in place in order to facilitate successful, targeted raids against AQAP leadership. Intelligence assets would need to be diverted from their current tasking in Afghanistan and Iraq in order to provide the services needed by USSOF. In addition to diverting assets from other areas of operation, U.S. leadership would have to accept the risk involved with placing U.S. forces in harm's way. Yet, by giving the U.S. the lead in counterterrorism operations, the immediate threat to the United States can be effectively disrupted, thus delivering on the resolute intent of denying al Qaeda safe haven in weak states.

Aside from the military aspect, the most immediate sociopolitical concern is to address the grievances between the leaders of the Southern Movement and the Yemeni

government. Additionally, the tribal elite of the South should also be brought in to any reconciliation discussions. The Sunni Awakening in Iraq provides an example of what can happen when emphasis is placed on political inclusion. As revealed in the preceding study, the southern political and tribal elite have been marginalized by the Saleh government; the U.S. should adopt the grievances as their ‘raison d’être.’ Regional allies should also help to address the political grievances. Oman had a part in mediating the end of the 1994 civil war and they would provide a more trusted voice to the southerners. The immediate and public campaign to address southern grievances would help to deny AQAP the support of the population.

The key to both the counterterrorism efforts and the political efforts lies in solid intelligence and a strategic communications campaign. As head of USCENTCOM, General David Petraeus emphasized the importance of robust intelligence and a strong strategic communications campaign and admitted the current weaknesses of the U.S. effort. In his Posture Review he notes that Operation Earnest Voice (OEV) is a critical part of U.S. strategic communications efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but is absent in Yemen.¹⁸⁸ A strategic communications campaign is only as good as the actions that back it up; a credo which AQAP is living up to with their efforts. U.S. counterterrorism efforts will only work they are in concert with an effective communications campaign. In addition to the strategic communications campaign, the U.S. should employ the full force of its intelligence community towards pinpointing key leadership nodes of AQAP in order to facilitate U.S. lead counterterrorism operations.

2. Recommendations for the Long Term

The U.S. needs to continue its efforts to reform the Yemeni government with a long term state building effort. Yemen is a sovereign state and ultimately reforming the government will be up to the leadership of the country. But the U.S. can continue to encourage fair and open elections as a means toward reform; reconciliation with the South will go hand in hand with these types of efforts. Reform efforts should be targeted and focused towards making sure the political rift between the North and South continues

¹⁸⁸ Senate Committee, *Statement of General David H. Petraeus: The Posture of U.S. Central Command*, 45.

to shrink. As long as the South remains politically engaged, its grievances can be addressed and AQAP is left with little to exploit.

The analysis Yemen's government has shown that Constitution of the country has provided the foundation for a viable pluralistic democracy. The political parties are in place to provide representation for the people and opposition to the ruling party. Opposition to President Saleh has come from the JMP, therefore any work towards political reform by the U.S. or the international community should include partnership with opposition leaders as well as those from the ruling party. In order to provide the government the capacity for good governance, efforts should be focused on reforming the one truly relevant government institution in Yemen, the Ministry of Finance. Only reform at the top levels of Saleh's patronage system will allow foreign aid find its way to local governments; and especially to the southern communities which have been marginalized by the patronage system.

The dangers with electoral reform are twofold: first, even with fair elections in place, Saleh and the ruling party may be voted back in office. This would give President Saleh added confidence to continue with the status quo. Second, if President Saleh is replaced, the disruption of the patronage system prior to economic reforms could cause revolts, especially in the North. Therefore the electoral reforms and economic reforms should be a parallel effort.

In the plethora of policy papers and analyses of Yemen there is mention of the endless social, economic, and political problems within the country. The dwindling resources of Yemen have been at the top of that list. Oil and water are rapidly running out, but the U.S. should only be concerned with one of the two: Water. The United States along with its regional allies should make water projects a marquee effort in Yemen. By making a focused effort to solve a problem felt by the entire Yemeni population, the U.S. can go a long way in gaining the support of the people in the long run. Although helping Yemen develop natural resources like oil or natural gas would help the country's economy, the perception of the U.S. exploring for fossil fuels would only add to the suspicion and give AQAP more ammunition in their ideological fight. International efforts to help Yemen conserve and procure water would not only help to

win over the southern population, but the northern population as well. An ambitious water project would become a unifying effort, thus thwarting the central tenet of AQAP's divisive strategy.

These policy recommendations are based on the assumptions that AQAP is an immediate threat to U.S. national security. The recent attempt by AQAP to mail explosive devices on U.S. bound cargo planes is a strong indication that this assumption is correct. The recommendations also assume that the government of Yemen, President Saleh in particular, is not ready or willing to reform his government into a more responsive and transparent institution. By taking the lead in counterterrorism operations, the U.S. can directly confront the immediate threat posed by AQAP, while at the same time denying the Saleh regime the means to strengthen his authoritarian rule. Additionally, by shifting the focus towards directly addressing grievances in the south, the U.S. can help deny AQAP the tribal support it has come to depend on. In the long run, Yemen poses an immense challenge. As long as efforts remain realistic and targeted, the U.S. can stay true to the resolute nature of its weak state strategy and deny al Qaeda a viable safe haven in Yemen.

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